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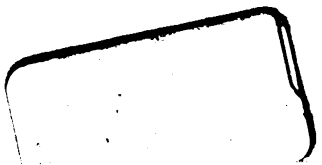

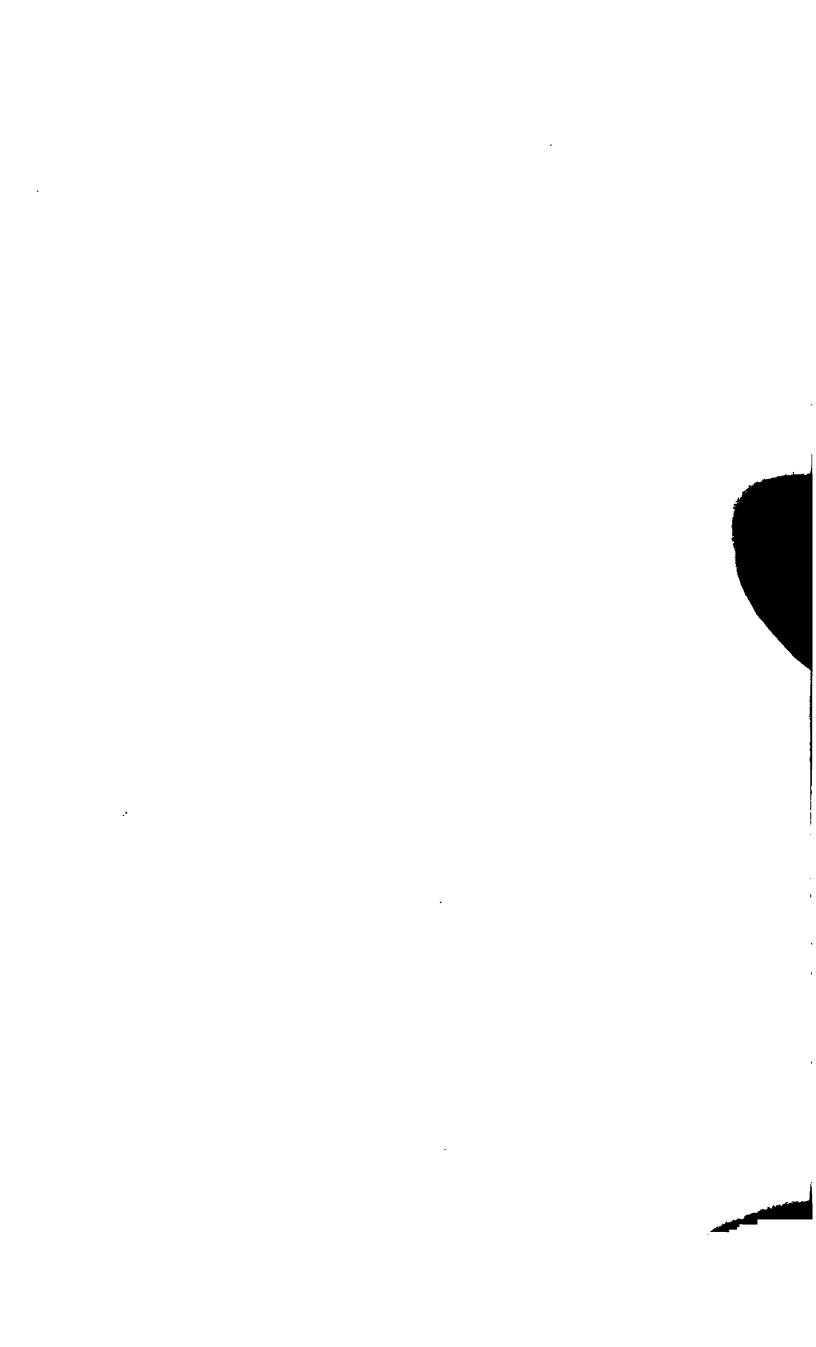

BROWNING

AND

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

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BROWNING

AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

THE EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIANITY FROM BROWNING'S POINT OF VIEW

BY

EDWARD BERDOE

Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England; Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (Edinburgh);

AUTHOR OF

"THE BROWNING CYCLOPÆDIA," "BROWNING'S MESSAGE TO HIS TIME," ETC.

"I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it."
A Death in the Desert.

SECOND EDITION

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TO

The Clergy, Ministers, Religious Teachers

OF ALL DENOMINATIONS OF CHRISTIANS, AND

TO THOSE WHO ARE PERPLEXED AND IN

DOUBT CONCERNING QUESTIONS OF

THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE

TO ALL,

THESE PAGES ARE RESPECTFULLY

DEDICATED

BY ONE WHO HAS HIMSELF WANDERED IN THE

MAZE AND FOUND ITS CLUE.

~~Grad. R. R. 2.~~
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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

A FEW words of personal explanation seem called for in offering this work to the notice of the public. It is always painful to obtrude one's private concerns on the attention of the outside world, and as I have no claim whatever to invite that attention to matters of my own history, I feel great diffidence in making public circumstances that, it may be said, cannot in any way interest anybody but myself. As my only object in doing so is the hope that I may help some readers of these pages whose experiences may have been similar to my own, I ask a lenient consideration of the following scrap of autobiography.

Twenty years ago, after a long course of reading the works of Agnostic teachers, I ceased to believe in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. About two years after this painful necessity of breaking with all my old associations in religious matters, I had approached as near

to Agnosticism as a reasonable being may; that is to say, I no longer believed in the God of the Bible, and did not think that any conception of the Supreme Power presented to the mind in any of the religious systems which I had investigated was supported by sufficient evidence to satisfy a scientific thinker of the present day. On the whole, such fragments of Buddhism as I had been able to appreciate seemed to be more satisfactory than anything else in the way of religious teaching; but so far as my own mind was concerned, I had succeeded in making a *tabula rasa*, not without many regrets at the loss of old ideals and the earnest hope that it might not be long before something better would replace them.

It was my good fortune one day to hear a brilliant and powerful lecture by Mr. Moncure Conway at South Place Chapel, Finsbury, on Robert Browning's *Sordello*. Up to that moment I had read nothing of the works of that poet save the few scraps which appear as quotations, usually from *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. On the following day I purchased a set of Browning's works. The first poem I read was *Saul*. I soon recognized that I was in the grasp of a strong hand, and as I continued to read *Paracelsus*, *Men and Women*, and *A Death in the Desert*, the feeling came over me that in Browning I had found my religious teacher, one who could put me right on a

hundred points which had troubled my mind for many years, and which had ultimately caused me to abandon the Christian religion. I joined the Browning Society, and in the discussions which followed the reading of the papers, I found the opportunity of having my doubts resolved, not by theological arguments, but by those suggested by Browning as "solving for me all questions in the earth and out of it." By slow and painful steps I found my way back to the faith I had forsaken. How I reached it, and how my studies have since confirmed it, is told in this book. I trust I may be pardoned for thinking this confession interesting to those who may read these pages, for it is always useful to know how others have solved difficulties which have troubled ourselves. It is this reflection which gives me confidence to make the avowal.

EDWARD BERDOE.

LONDON,
October 21, 1895.

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INTRODUCTION

A STUDENT at one of our theological colleges once consulted the divinity lecturer as to the best books on modern theology which he could present to a clerical friend. The answer came promptly and decisively—"Give him a set of Browning." The advice was not followed; the student was only partially familiar with the great poet's works, and could not quite see how they would help a country parson in his pulpit duties. But some years after this suggestion, he took up the study of Browning more systematically, and then he saw the wisdom of his tutor's advice. The world is becoming very sick of dogma, and daily becomes more unwilling to believe anything on mere authority. Creeds and confessions of faith are growing out of date. The spread of education, the increasing power of the press, and the inquiring attitude of the nineteenth-century mind, constitute an unfavourable atmosphere for the dogmatic churches. If

the Christian religion is to be made acceptable to the thinking portion of the community, it must be proposed to the reason and not propounded as something to be taken or rejected without inquiry, under threats of eternal penalties. Christianity has no need of such a defence; of all religions it is the most reasonable, and has less cause than any other to shrink from the fiercest light of investigation and the minutest methods of inquiry. Unhappily, however, it is much easier to meet opposition by denunciation than by argument, and it takes less time to condemn one's antagonist as an "infidel" than to expose the fallacies in his reasoning.

The opponents of the Christian faith assert that "among all but certain of the aged and the very illiterate, belief, in the strict orthodox sense of the term, is practically dead—openly and tacitly, men and women are ashamed of the gospel of Christ."[1] They declare that of those who do not actually quit the Christian camp there remain thousands who live a lie: they are outwardly religious, inwardly heretical. Philosophic doubt, we are told, is in the air, and those who tell us this rejoice in the fact, because "doubt is the source of human progress." But they lament that the poisonous germs of moral cowardice are also present in the intellectual atmosphere, and that nine out of ten of the

[1] *National Reformer*, June 11, 1893, p. 369.

more intelligent professing Christians would be outspoken Atheists or Agnostics if they dared. This would be a terrible indictment if it were true; it is, however, merely the expression of the alarm of the opponents of Christianity at its latest development; it requires only to be stated in set terms for its falsity to be demonstrated. So far from it being the fact that men and women are "openly and tacitly ashamed of the gospel of Christ," it is certain that the teaching of Jesus has a stronger hold on men's minds and hearts to-day than it ever had before. It would seem that the world is only just beginning to grasp the real inwardness of Christ's gospel.

We are not concerned to deny that what is intended by the term "strict orthodoxy" is rapidly dying out, but strict orthodoxy and vital Christianity are by no means synonymous. That we are in the midst of a great crisis in matters religious is not to be disputed, and nothing is to be gained by concealing or disguising the fact.

As the great tunnel under Mont Cenis neared completion, the French and Italian workmen on opposite sides were able to hear each other's voices and the blows of their picks. Soon they met and shook hands. They had toiled for years from opposite sides, but their work was harmonious, and the great international railroad under the Alps was an accomplished fact. Ever

since the dawn of modern science in the beginning of the sixteenth century, two great classes of thinkers have been engaged in an intellectual feat of road-making on similar principles. The men of faith and the men of science have tunnelled their Alps from opposite points. Unlike the engineers of Mont Cenis, they fancied themselves in actual opposition to each other, never expecting to meet, still less to fraternize. The Conflict between Religion and Science has been the theme of many a treatise, and the necessary opposition of the two bodies of labourers in the field of human knowledge has been taken for granted. But already, faintly yet surely, we begin to hear the voices of the workmen of opposite sides, as the roads they are making tend to meet in one central point; they call to each other, not in threatening tones, but as fellow-labourers on the same path. None but the actual workmen can imagine how nearly they approach each other. To the great outside world they are lost in the bowels of the earth, are forgotten, or scarcely thought about. Yet a few more cubic feet of rock to bore, a few more tons of detritus to remove, and the path-makers will throw the road open to the world.

One of our greatest spiritual path-makers and Alp-tunnellers was Robert Browning. Deep down under the mountain he laboured, practically forgotten, misunderstood, and neglected; yet he was foremost amongst the great constructors of

the ways of intellectual activity. Those of us who have been down with the miners, know how many obstacles Browning has cleared away; those who have worked under his orders, know how firm and straight is the roadway he has constructed. Not only has he established a *modus vivendi* between science and religion, but he has demonstrated that the one is the complement of the other. He has made scientific religion an accomplished fact.

"The malady of the century" is melancholy. Mr. Myers tells us that in many minds there is a bankruptcy of hope; despair dwells in "the splendid and miserable temple which is the heart of man." Religion is held to be an illusion; a belief in the moral government of the world, in a future life in which earth's injustices may be redressed, and virtue victorious, are now everywhere on the defensive, if they are not, as in France, actually rapidly losing ground. Men treat as open questions the problem, "Is there a God?" "Is the soûl immortal?" "Is the Christian revelation credible?" and are but little anxious for an affirmative reply to them. Yet the answer to such questions can never be anything but of vital importance to mankind. Morality must depend largely on the solution of these and similar questions. "There is no historic instance," says Professor Knight, "in which the decay of religious influence has promoted morality." On the other hand, if we

"suppose that there is conclusive evidence not only of a moral order existing independently of the individual, but also of a moral centre toward which individual effort tends, and of an infinite Orderer who, from that centre, controls the moral sphere, such a fact must, in a very important way, influence the conduct of the race."

At first sight it may seem strange that we should be invited to study Browning as a religious teacher. It is not usually to the poets that we turn for lessons in philosophy and theology, but it is perfectly certain that Browning wrote with this object in view. The religious motive is plainly to be seen in almost every poem.

He was above all things a great philosopher. The unity of his work is manifest to the most superficial observer, from the first lines of *Pauline* —his boyish effort—to his death-song in the Epilogue to *Asolando*. In *Pauline* the poet confesses his sin and degradation, consequent on his all-encompassing selfishness; he tells how his soul was called out of mental darkness to the light of Christianity; how he was anointed poet; how his redemption and restoration were wrought by Divine love, by means of the mediation of human love; and from that time onwards, to the day of his death, Robert Browning never once looked back; never faltered in his message; never once despaired of God, of life, of human love, or of the infinite worth of the soul's period of training and passage—

"Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake."[1]

When a strong, brave man has proclaimed his message to the world for six-and-fifty years, it is worth while to listen to him, more especially when we know that he has lived up to his own professions, and carried out faithfully in his own long life the precepts and maxims he has propounded to the world at large.

His complete works in the new edition number seventeen volumes, and embrace many branches of human knowledge; yet from the first pages of the first volume down to the closing lines of the last, one clear trumpet note rings through his whole long life-work—"I believe in God." *Pauline*—his first, and embryonic work as it may be called, because it contains in their rudiments all the peculiarities and powers of his genius—is a passionate cry for the satisfying presence of God in his soul.

"A need, a trust, a yearning after God." "I saw God everywhere." He calls the air "The clear, dear breath of God that loveth us."

"What is that I hunger for but God?
My God, my God, let me for once look on Thee
As though nought else existed, we alone!"

---

[1] Epilogue to *Asolando*.

"I believe in God and truth and love."[1] This then, at the outset, was the dominant note of the poet's work, and the "imperial chord subsists" and is heard no less clearly in the last pages of *Asolando*.

> "In a beginning God
> Made heaven and earth."
>
> "From the first, Power was—I knew
> Life has made clear to me
> That, strive but for closer view,
> Love were as plain to see."[2]

But Browning was much more than a Theist, he was a Christian. The Son of God made man for us solves for Browning all the hard problems of existence. By Christ he came to know God, and knowing God as He can only be known in the person of the God-man, the infinite worth of the soul, the value of life, the certainty of a future state, the mystery of evil, pain, sin, and death were made plain to him. In his teaching on these high matters we have a religious system definite enough to satisfy all Christians save those who demand scholastic definitions of every article of their faith, and rigid lines of demarcation which must not be transgressed under pain of deadly sin. On these grounds, if the present work makes no pretension to be considered as a manual of theology, it is hoped that it may not be without value at least as a sidelight on Christianity.

[1] *Pauline.* [2] *Asolando:* "Reverie."

BROWNING

AND

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

CHAPTER I

GOD

By the term "God" we understand the one absolutely and infinitely perfect Being who is the Creator of all visible and invisible things. The first article of the poet's creed is—

> "I find first
> Writ down for very A. B. C. of fact,
> 'In the beginning, God made heaven and earth.'"[1]

Apart from a written revelation, the belief in a Creator is natural and instinctive to the human mind. Nothing is easier to teach a child than this "A. B. C. of fact." Atheism must be *taught* a man, Theism of one kind or another—dim,

[1] *The Ring and the Book*, Pt. I., ll. 707-9.

imperfect, or corrupt—is instinctive. There are no atheist races of men; every savage tribe has some sort of belief in a Spirit or Being outside and more powerful than men. Pure Atheism is repugnant to all, and can only be arrived at by a long process of perverted reasoning. Atheism has no A. B. C.

Yet the arguments from a general consensus of human belief must not be pushed too far. "We must give up," says Lotze,[1] "the attempt to base belief in the existence of God upon the agreement of mankind. Moods and presentiments that point to something unknown and invisible are indeed developed in every human soul under the influence of the experience of life; but, except under favourable conditions of development, they hardly produced more than a state of objectless fear, to which brutes also would be subject if they were not too devoid of thought to collect into a permanent group the individual frights which they experience."

Yet Cicero could say in his day that "No people is without faith in a God, although they may be ignorant of His Nature." The discovery of new races of men, and the researches of anthropology, according to the investigations and conclusions of Tylor, Quatrefages, Tiele, Peschel, and others, prove that all savage tribes, however degraded, so far as known, have some

[1] *Mikrokosmus*, vol. i., p. 685.

kind of religious sense, and some idea of moral obligation. If these are not of divine origin, by whom and how was religion invented?

The Supreme Being, says Browning, is

> "What I call God,
> And fools call Nature."[1]

He recognizes a great First Cause—God; fools call Nature the First Cause, mistaking the effect for the cause. The Pantheist makes his creative cause identical with the created things themselves. Browning was not a Materialist. Materialism teaches that matter is the origin and principle of all existing things. Matter is declared to be eternal, containing all things, and beside it is neither God, nor soul, nor conscience. Pantheism teaches that all things are identical in nature, substance, and essence. All things are but manifestations or forms of the One Infinite Being. Neither Materialism nor Pantheism have any place in Browning's system. He taught the doctrine of a Personal God. By the licence allowed to poets he calls those persons "fools" who call Nature—whether Matter or the Manifestation of the Infinite—God. In his long poem, *La Saisiaz*, we have the result of the poet's musings on death, God, the soul, and the future state. The poem is of the first importance for the purpose of this work, because the

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1073-4.

conclusions arrived at must be considered as the author's deliberate convictions; the opinions expressed and the faith proclaimed cannot be set aside as utterances dramatically put into the mouths of characters with whom the writer has merely a literary sympathy.

The poem expresses a Theism of the loftiest kind, and the grounds on which the arguments are based are as philosophical as they are devout. The anxious questioning of the poet's soul is answered. In a more or less satisfactory way the soul's craving for truth is rewarded by a reply. The mental process of question and answer presupposes knowledge, and the recognition of a force perceived to be outside itself and "actual ere its own beginning, operative through its course, unaffected by its end." We have here, says the poet, two facts—God, and the soul: the only facts he wants upon which to base his Theistic system. He cannot prove them facts, and that he cannot do so proves them facts. He knows that he knows not something which nevertheless is fact. "No syllogistic proof," says F. W. Newman,[1] "is possible that a God exists or listens to prayer, just as no syllogistic proof of an outer world will ever be gained. Perhaps there is no outer world, and our internal sensations are the universe." "Some tell us that substance and matter are illusive

[1] *The Soul*, p. 120.

terms; and that a substance is nothing but a congeries of forces, coherent and repulsive." The famous metaphysical proof of Descartes was evidently in the poet's mind in this connection: *Cogito, ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am." We know that our senses often mislead us as to the nature of things without us. We strike our forehead in the dark, we see sparks though there are none; we fancy we hear sounds when half asleep, bells ring, our name is called—it is all in our imagination; in delirium we see objects which have no existence outside our brain. We carry on conversations in our dreams with persons who seem as real to us as any whom we meet in our waking hours. Perhaps we are misled as to there being anything without us at all. Even in mathematics our most certain judgments may be illusory. Descartes finds his primary unit of thought and being, on which depends all knowledge, in simple self-consciousness. "I think": all else may be illusion, but this at least is real. Separate the thinking self from that which it thinks about, and still the thinking self remains, and in thinking, "I am." *Cogito, ergo sum.* The soul, therefore, is certain of its own existence, and recognizes that there is a power outside itself, and which is altogether independent of the soul, and Browning calls this power—God. So we have, as Newman said, a certainty of the existence of "two, and two only,

supreme and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator."

"God! thou art mind!" says Paracelsus, echoing the noble definition of the Supreme Cause of all things given by Aristotle when he said—"God is Thought; the absolute, eternal, thinking Essence, distinct from matter; Thought, ever the same and unchanged, whose object is supreme perfection."[1]

To prove the real existence of the thinking *ego* is to prove the existence of God the Supreme Thought, Essential Mind, Infinite Intelligence. It is irrational to suppose that although we have reason and intelligence, there should be no infinite reason and intelligence; a conception of order and no fount of order; aspirations after truth and no supreme truth. Not to postulate the existence of an Energizing Reason in the universe, is to fail to understand the human soul itself. It is to contemplate a stream and ignore the source; to rest content in the effect without reference to its cause. "Ask the rush," says Browning, "if it suspects whence and how the stream which floats it had its rise, and where and how it flows on still?" The rush at most only knows it floats and is, that the every-way external stream floats it onward, may be wrecks it or lands it on shore to root again and remain stable, all this may be

[1] *Metaphys.*, xii. 7, 9.

is mere surmise not knowledge. "Man," says Pascal, "is but a reed, the weakest thing in nature; but it is a reed that thinks. There is no need that the universe arm itself to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water, is enough to kill him. But though the universe should crush him, man is more noble than that which destroys him, for he knows that he dies; but the universe, with all the advantage which it has over him, the universe knows nothing whatever about it."[1] By the fact that man thinks he proves the reality of his own existence, and at the moment he realizes the fact may recognize if he will that he is the creature of the Absolute Reason, the Eternal Mind, the Personal God. Herein consists the dignity of the Soul of Man; for

> "God is soul, souls I and thou: with souls should souls have place."

It is God "who owns the soul," and in virtue of this possession, there is an ineffable relationship between the Creator and the creature, and this relationship Browning calls "God's intercourse with the human kind."[2]

> "O Thou, the one force in the whole variation
> Of visible nature . . .
> A film hides us from Thee."

---

[1] Pascal, *Thoughts*, ii. 10.

[2] *Paracelsus.*

[3] *Parleyings with Fust and his Friends.*

"God has His archangels and consorts with them: though He made too, and intimately sees what is good in, the worm."[1]

Yet nowhere is He more really present than in the human heart, for—

> "God . . . . dwells in all,
> From life's minute beginnings, up at last
> To man—the consummation of this scheme
> Of being, the completion of this sphere
> Of life."[2]

He dwells in inanimate and unmoral things, but of ourselves He is the Soul of our souls, and alone can fill the heart of man. Yet

> "God . . . . stands away
> As it were a handbreadth off, to give
> Room for the newly-made to live."[3]

God stirs no finger to interfere with the freedom of man's will, nor denotes that right on earth should have supremacy over wrong.

> "How helpful, could we quote
> But one poor instance when He interposed promptly and beyond mistake
> Between oppression and its victim."[4]

And yet, though we cannot forget that "the physical universe has fixed, unaltering laws, we

[1] *A Soul's Tragedy.* [2] *Paracelsus.*
[3] *Christmas Eve and Easter Day.*
[4] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*

cannot help seeing God's hand in events. Whatever happens, we think of as His mercies, His kindnesses; or His visitations and His chastisements: everything comes to us from His love."[1]

Let others settle the paradox, for Browning

"All's Love, yet all's Law."[2]

God in the Scriptures is declared to be *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God. He can only be discovered by those who seek Him with their whole hearts.

"It is true," says Pascal,[3] "both that God hides Himself from those who tempt Him, and that He reveals Himself to those who seek Him, because men are both unworthy and capable of God; unworthy by their corruption, capable by their original nature."

It is not difficult for faithful seekers to find God. Browning was such a seeker. His first poem, *Pauline*, expresses finely the cry of every fibre of the poet's whole being for God, and every page of his subsequent work, down to his swan song in death, proclaims that he found and dwelt in God. In his remarkable poem entitled *Fears and Scruples*,[4] which deals with the spiritual uses of uncertainty, the silence

[1] F. W. Newman, *The Soul*, p. 131.
[2] *Saul.*
[3] *Thoughts: Of Original Sin.*
[4] *Pacchiarotto*, etc.

of the Divine Being is compared with that of a man's friend who wrote him many valued letters, but otherwise kept aloof from him. It is suggested by experts that the letters are forgeries. The man loves on. It is then suggested that his friend is acting as a spy upon him, sees him readily enough and knows all he does, and some day will show himself to punish him. But this is to make the friend a monster! Hush!—"What if this friend happen to be—God?"

"The Infinite always is silent;
It is only the Finite speaks:
. . . . . .
We may question with wand of science,
Explain, deride, and discuss;
But only in meditation
The Mystery speaks to us."

This relationship between the soul and God explains "man's need, his trust, his yearning after God."[1] The aged Rabbi, contemplating his life from youth to old age, exclaims—

"But I need, now as then,
Thee, God, who mouldest men."[2]

"The end of man," says St. Thomas Aquinas, "is the Uncreated Good, namely God, who alone of His infinite Goodness can perfectly satisfy the will of man."[3] "It is impossible for the

[1] *Pauline.* [2] *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*
[3] *Summa Theologiæ*, Pt. I., II., Qu. iii.

happiness of man to be in any created good. For happiness is perfect Good, which entirely appeases desire; otherwise it would not be the last end, if something still remained to be desired. But the object of the will is universal Good, as the object of the intellect is universal truth. Hence it is clear that nothing can set the will of man to rest but universal Good, which is not found in anything created, but in God alone. Hence God alone can fill the heart of man."[1] Therefore the poet says God is his "lode-star," and looking back he sees that he has wasted or progressed in proportion as he looked towards it.[2] Kant postulates the existence of God from the necessary condition of the existence of the *summum bonum* by the supposition of the supreme independent Good.[3] It is by the way of the moral law, not by that of the speculative faculty, that the seeker must find God.

"I find that the moral principle admits as possible only the conception of an Author of the world possessed of the highest perfection. He must be *omniscient* in order to know my conduct up to the inmost root of my mental state in all possible cases and into all future time; *omnipotent*, in order to allot to it its fitting consequences; similarly, he must be

[1] *Summa Theologiæ*, Pt. I., II., Qu. iii.
[2] *Pauline.* [3] Kant's *Ethics*, Pt. II., ch. ii., 6.

omnipresent, eternal, etc. Thus the moral law, by means of the conception of the *summum bonum* as the object of a pure, practical reason, determines the concept of the First Being *as the Supreme Being.* . . The conception of God, then, is one that belongs originally not to physics, *i.e.* to speculative reason, but to morals."[1]

When God is recognized as the highest Good, who alone can satisfy the heart of man, the Will chooses Him and the Soul tends to union with God by love. "Love gains him by first leap."[2]

> "I cling with my mind
> To the same, same self, same love, same God."[3]

God is Mind, but He is also Love. "God! Thou art love! I build my faith on that!"[4]

Browning has been accused of Agnosticism,[5] because he rates knowledge so far below love; and in truth he is not the poet of intellect, but pre-eminently that of love.

> "Love is victory, the prize itself:
> Love—trust to! Be rewarded for the trust
> In trust's mere act."[6]

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[1] Kant's *Ethics,* Pt. II., ch. ii., 7.

[2] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Pillar at Sebzevah."

[3] *Abt Vogler.* [4] *Paracelsus.*

[5] See the chapter on "Browning's Attitude towards Science" in this work, p. 223.

[6] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Pillar at Sebzevah."

A mere intellectual Theism in which the Infinite Being is postulated as nothing more than the Creator and Master of all things is not Browning's conception of God. "Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!"[1] dwelling in the immensities in His visible power, and in the human heart by His intimate relation to the soul, God is recognized by the poet as the Infinitely Good—

> "For the loving worm within its clod,
> Were diviner than a loveless god
> Amid his worlds."[2]

"He who is Pity"[3] fashioned the human hand "out of the infinite love of His heart."[4] Well might poor little Pippa say, "God's in His heaven—all's right with the world!"[5] The murdered Pompilia dying with forgiveness in her heart because of the love of God, asks, "Where will God be absent? Why should I doubt He will explain?"[6] And this love in the human heart is heaven-sent—

> "For God above
> Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
> And creates the love to reward the love."[7]

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[1] *Abt Vogler.* [2] *Christmas Eve and Easter Day.*
[3] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," l. 1183.
[4] *James Lee's Wife.* [5] *Pippa Passes.*
[6] *The Ring and the Book:* "Pompilia.
[7] *Evelyn Hope.*

Imbued with the love of God, the poet looks out upon a world of sin and sorrow, and can say that "all is beauty, and knowing this, is love, and love is duty."[1] Browning did not know God merely as a Theist, nor did he teach the doctrine of a personal God only from that point of view. He recognized the Creator as a Father, and himself as His loving child—

"Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable Name?
Builder and maker, Thou, of houses not made with hands!
What, have fear of change from Thee who art ever the same?
Doubt that Thy power can fill the heart that Thy power expands?"[2]

God is to be known, not by reasoning but by experience. The abstract conception of God finds no place in Browning's teaching. A concrete conception of the Divine is found in Browning's works from first to last. Call it anthropomorphic if we will, the fact is indisputable that such was Browning's idea of God.

"This is the glory,—that in all conceived,
Or felt or known, I recognize a mind
Not mine but like mine,—for the double joy,—
Making all things for me and me for Him."[3]

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[1] *The Guardian Angel.*
[2] *Abt Vogler.*
[3] *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.*

"God is Truth," says Browning—

"Were't not for God, I mean, what hope of truth—
Speaking truth, hearing truth, would stay with man?"[1]

Fust declares[2] that "Truth is God." St. Augustine argues for the existence of God from the very nature of truth. We cannot conceive of the universe without truth somewhere existent in it. The grains of truth existent in our own souls, our very conception of truth, our belief in the One Supreme Perfect Being, imply that there is a Source whence all truth springs. Our reason implies an Absolute Reason, just as our knowledge of love and goodness implies a perfect Being who is the fount of love and goodness—

"The truth in God's breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed:
Though He is so bright and we so dim,
We are made in His image to witness Him."[3]

The poet argues that did we not possess an eye instructed by our inner sense, enabling us to distinguish heaven's light from hell's darkness, although justice, goodness, and truth were still divine, that light would want its evidence if hatred and wrong had been proclaimed law through the universe, and right misnamed.

[1] *A Soul's Tragedy*, Act I.
[2] *Parleyings with Fust and his Friends.*
[3] *Christmas Eve and Easter Day.*

The worst man upon earth knows in his conscience more of what right is than arises at birth in the best man's acts before which we bow. "Plato recognizes the principle of reason as the remembrance of what the soul saw in some former state of existence when in company with God, truths in which God is, and in the knowledge of which He is God."[1]

St. Thomas Aquinas says—"When we say that we see all things in God, and according to Him judge of all things, we mean that we know and judge all things by participation in His light. For the natural light of reason is itself a certain participation of the divine light."[2]

"Man's reason sees the light of the universal reason; which is the True, the Right, the Perfect, the Good which has true worth, to the reason of man, is the True, the Right, the Perfect, the Good which has true worth, to the universal reason of God."[3]

Says Chiappino, in *A Soul's Tragedy*—

> "I trust in nature for the stable laws
> Of beauty and utility . . . .
> I trust in God—the right shall be the right
> And other than the wrong, while He endures."

He trusts in his own soul, that can perceive the truth and recognize nature's good and God's.

[1] *Phædrus*, 249.
[2] *Summa Theologiæ*, Pt. I., Qu. xii., Art. 11.
[3] Harris, *Philosophical Basis of Theism*, p. 183.

Our reason changes and is apt to err, but the Truth of God is necessary truth and dominates the soul, and the soul by apprehending and obeying it finds the light. "Truth is within ourselves," exclaims Paracelsus;[1] it does not arise from outward things, but from that inmost centre in us all in which in fullness truth abides. It is walled about by the gross flesh, and *to know* consists in opening a way whereby the imprisoned splendour may escape, rather than in effecting an entry for a light supposed to be without. In *The Ring and the Book* the Pope compares his conception of truth to a poor spark, which had for its source the sun. To that source he sends great looks, which compel light from its fount; all he is and does comes from the truth, seen, surmised, remembered, or divined. His mind is but a convex glass, wherein are gathered the scattered points picked from out the immensity of sky. In God is the absolute immensity, the whole truth; in man such a whole as is proportioned to his sense. The little mind of man reduces to littleness that suits his faculty, the Truth which is God. In his own

> "circle of experience burns
> The central truth, Power, Wisdom, Goodness,—God."[2]

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[1] *Paracelsus.*

[2] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1633-34.

Man apprehends God in such conception as his soul allows.

> "Man, with the narrow mind, must cram inside
> His finite God's infinitude."[1]

Man may demand the right to understand what passes understanding, in virtue of his capacity to focus in his mind the rays proceeding from the Supreme fount of light; "while pent within humanity's restricted space," he will of necessity fail to grasp the formless and illimitable; that he essays to do so proves his divine origin and his eternal destiny.

> "Mind seeks to see,
> Touch, understand, by mind inside of me,
> The outside mind."[2]

Browning does not send us to the immensities to seek for God; it is the little things which go lessening—

> "Till at last comes God behind them"[3]

wherein the poet sees "the small becomes the dreadful and immense!" God makes the mites, and the Ineffable Name comes close behind the infusoria, the mere sacs that are mouth, heart, legs, and belly at once, yet which live and feel, and could do neither if simplified one degree

[1] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*
[2] *Ibid.* [3] *Mr. Sludge: The Medium.*

further. Behind these lowest forms of life stands

"The power which pricked nothingness to perfection."[1]

And in this nothingness, which in its way becomes perfection—

"God tastes an infinite joy, in infinite ways."[2]

From Him "all being emanates, all power proceeds," in Him is life for evermore; yet existence, even its lowest form, includes Him, and in completed Man, the consummation of Creation's scheme, begins anew "a tendency to God."

"God is the perfect poet,
Who in His person acts His own creations;"[3]

and is

"Glad that we love His world so much."[4]

Time exists not for Him—

"God's instant men call years,"

Pompilia calls it.[5] Yet even Count Guido, the murderer awaiting death, can recognize "the terrible patience of God."[6]

Taken as a whole, Browning's conception of God does not differ from that of the great teachers of Christianity and the apologists of Theism,

[1] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*
[2] *Paracelsus.* [3] *Ibid.* [4] *Pippa Passes.*
[5] *The Ring and the Book:* "Pompilia," l. 1841.
[6] *Ibid.:* "Guido," l. 1380.

like Kant. St. Thomas Aquinas establishes the necessity of a PRIMUM MOVENS NON MOTUM. Contingent beings exist, therefore there must be an Absolute Being, independent and self-existing. The temporal and mutable suppose an Eternal and an Immutable, and the finite demands an Infinite, who must be at the same time Intelligent and Personal—*i. e.* God.[1]

This God of Browning's is a Personal God, who loves us, pities us, and in the person of Jesus Christ died to save us. In the words of Rabbi Ben Ezra—

"Soul and God stand sure,"

though all else be change.

Yet with all these proofs for the existence of the Supreme Being, Author of all light and life, it has been well said—"The very wealth of contents in the idea of God inevitably exposes the idea to the assaults of Agnosticism. All knowledge implies and may contribute to the knowledge of God. The more comprehensive an idea is, from the more points can it be assailed, and the idea of God, being comprehensive of all ultimate ideas, may be assailed through them all; as, for example, through the idea of being or of infinity, or of causality, or of personality, or of rectitude. Just because the idea of God is thus elevated in all respects, there are many

[1] *La Ciudad de Dios*, Jan. 1893.

minds which fail or refuse to rise up to it, and which, because of its very truth, reject it as not true at all."[1]

> "All in vain
> Would mind address itself to render plain
> The nature of the Essence."[2]

We can no more expect to understand God than we can hope to understand the sun by the light of its own rays. Enough for us that those rays turn night into glorious noon, flood the universe with glory, and inform alike the "earth's centre and sky's outspan." And let it be enough for us the fact that, by rejecting the action of God in the world, the inexplicable meets us at every step. God is the "Author of all light and life."[3] We do not refuse the sun's light because the sun itself is beyond our comprehension, yet God is rejected because philosophers fail to understand Him. And so the idea of the Supreme is set aside as "the guess of a worm in the dark, and the shadow of its desire."

In a poem entitled, *Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island*, Browning deals with a crude and anthropomorphic conception of God in the mind of a savage, which bears some resemblance to a form of theology which

[1] Prof. Flint, *Encyc. Brit.*: Art. "Theism."
[2] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*
[3] *Ferishtah's Fancies*: "The Sun."

was at one time not uncommon, but which is now happily passing away before a higher and nobler conception of the Supreme Being. This poem has been declared to be a satire upon Christianity, but no one familiar with the poet's whole work could entertain such an idea for a moment. The poet shows us Shakespeare's Caliban speculating on matters theological. He thinks God, whom he calls Setebos, has his dwelling-place in the moon, thinks he made the sun and moon, but not the stars; the clouds, and the island on which he dwells. He believes that Creation was the result of God being ill at ease. He made the trees, the birds and beasts and creeping things, and made them in spite. He could not create a second self to be his mate, but made in envy, listlessness, or sport, all the creatures on the island as playthings. Caliban thinks that if he had the power to make a live bird out of clay, he would laugh if the creature broke his brittle earthen leg; he would sport with him, being his own property and merely clay. So, he thinks, does Setebos. It would neither be right nor wrong in him, neither kind nor cruel, but merely an act of the Divine Sovereignty. If Caliban saw a procession of crabs marching to the sea, he might feel inclined in mere indifferent playfulness to let twenty pass and then stone the twenty-first, pull off a claw from one with purple spots, give a worm

to a third, and two to another whose nippers end in red, all the while "Loving not, hating not, just choosing so!" But he will suppose that in the main Setebos is good; he has made things which are better than himself, and is envious that they are so, but he consoles himself by reflecting that they can do nothing without him. Caliban thinks that there may be a something over Setebos that made him, something quiet, impassible—call it The Quiet. Beyond the stars he imagines The Quiet to reside, but is not greatly concerned about it. Caliban does not agree with his mother Sycorax, who held that The Quiet made all things, and Setebos only troubled what The Quiet made; this he cannot accept. If things were made weak and subject to pain, they were made by a devil, not by a good or an indifferent being. Now it is evident that what the poet aims at satirizing is not Theism, but the anthropomorphic idea of God which cannot be other than defective, even when it is not gross and anti-Theistic. If it be impossible for us to form an abstract idea of God, it is certain to lead us into error if we think that the Supreme Being is altogether such a one as ourselves. That the object of the poem is to rebuke the gross anthropomorphic idea of God is evident from the fact that at the head of the poem the poet places as the motto the quotation from Psalm l. 21—"Thou thoughtest that

I was altogether such an one as thyself." That a form of Calvinism is aimed at in Caliban's notion of God's character will be evident from a reference to the words of the Genevan theologian himself. According to Calvin, God has foreordained some to everlasting life, others to everlasting punishment. He does not choose the elect for any good He sees in them; nor does He condemn to eternal reprobation those whose evil deeds He has foreseen. "If," says Calvin, "we cannot assign any reason for His bestowing mercy on His people, but just that it pleases Him, neither can He have any reason for reprobating others but His will."[1]

In his poem, *Johannes Agricola in Meditation*, Mr. Browning exhibits the horrible doctrines of Antinomianism which have been held by many who pushed Calvinism to extremes, and held doctrines on election and reprobation hardly to be distinguished from Caliban's speculations about Setebos.

Mr. Mill, if I mistake not, in one of his essays, urges the following objections against the Christian conception of the Supreme Being—

1. If the universe be the work of a God who possesses infinite power, it ought to be free from every defect from which unlimited power could have delivered it. How very far the universe is from such perfection is only too obvious.

[1] Calvin's *Institutes*, lib. iii. 22.

Did, then, a God of limited power create the world?

2. If a God of infinite power and wisdom made the world and its inhabitants, he could not possibly have created the imperfect structures which are often discovered in the bodies of men and animals. Even the human eye, wonderful as is its structure, has been declared by Helmholtz to be so imperfect as an optical instrument, that if a workman made such a one now he would lose his situation for his incompetence. Parents transmit hideous diseases to their children, even their vices and imperfections are transmitted. Lunacy and idiotcy are handed down from generation to generation, miserable heritages of imperfection and disease are perpetrated in families for ages. Children enter the world heavily handicapped physically and morally. If all this is the work of a Supreme Being, he must be limited in power and wisdom.

3. It is further argued that on the supposition that the Creator is possessed of infinite power and wisdom, he must be wanting at least in benevolence, or he would not permit his creatures to suffer when he could make them all perfectly happy.

4. Neither do we see that justice perfectly prevails in the world. A perfectly just, wise, benevolent, and omnipotent God, it is argued,

would not permit the present moral order so imperfectly to represent him, and thus, we are told, the Creator must be defective in one or other of these attributes.

These objections have long formed the stock-in-trade of infidel stump orators, and the more respectable anti-Christian lecturers at so-called "halls of science." After a course of Browning study they appear so trivial, superficial, and unscientific, that the student is more surprised that a philosophical writer could have formulated them than have been puzzled to answer them. The objection that the universe is imperfect is a daring assumption, and could only be sustained by an omniscient critic, who having penetrated to the infinities with a knowledge only equalled by that of the Creator, could assure Him that He was mistaken when He said that "it was very good." On the assumption that the universe was created by "a God who possesses infinite power," it surely demands a critic of infinite wisdom to understand it. The objector thinks it "only too obvious" that it is an imperfect universe. If "obvious" mean "easy to be understood," the use of the term in such a connection is about as suitable and reasonable as would be the criticism of an ant on the slopes of Mont Blanc as to the theory of the action of glaciers. As we know but little of the world of matter or spirit, and still less of the universe, we are not

in a position to answer the question the essayist propounds, Did a God of limited power create the world? in the manner he suggests. We shall see, however, as we proceed, that the imperfections of the world as a place of training for the human soul are not quite so obvious as he supposes.

The second objection, that a God of infinite power and wisdom could not possibly have created the imperfect structures often discovered in the bodies of men and animals, is not more scientific than the first. We know a great deal more about "imperfect structures" in animal bodies since Darwin revolutionized the theory of development, and taught the doctrines of descent and origin of species. The objection of Helmholtz to the human eye considered as an optical instrument is hardly worthy of serious consideration, and was probably uttered as a smart thing to say, rather than as a regret that the eminent physiologist had not been called in by the Creator as a consultant when He formed the organ of human sight. To compare an instrument from the optician's with the human eye is as absurd as it is ignorant, and no physiologist could seriously do so. Take an opera-glass or microscope, for example; a fall destroys it, a film of dust renders it useless till cleansed, it cannot be adjusted automatically, but must be moved with wheel-work till correctly focussed.

Outside the precise field the image is apt to be blurred. If we broke the optic lens every time we fell, no child would learn to walk without losing its sight. The beautiful arrangement whereby the eye-ball is kept bright and clean ensures clear sight when we use our eyes. We look up from the book we are reading to cast our eyes over a landscape many miles in extent, and the apparatus for accommodation of sight works so automatically and rapidly that we are unconscious of the changes in the organ of vision, changes which would require far more perfect workmanship than Professor Helmholtz could secure from any of his mechanics. We look at a printed page now, and the next moment at a distant view; there is no more blurring of the outer portion of the field of vision in the one case than in the other; we cannot procure spectacles to act like this, unless by the clumsy device of a divided lens. But when we consider the eye as a living organ formed of membranes, nerves, tissues, and water, and not of hard glass, or other imperishable material, our wonder at the constant renovation of its power and perfection is increased. But, after all, the eye itself is the least wonderful part of the visionary process; it is the power behind the eye which interprets the ocular image, and turns the process into sight. The instrument itself is the least portion of the wonder; the nerve-power which sees, and the

brain which translates, is the miracle which no artisan can imitate.

Browning makes the Creator address the creature in a beautiful passage in *Ferishtah's Fancies*[1] in the following terms—

> "Wherefore did I contrive for thee that ear
> Hungry for music, and direct thine eye
> To where I hold a seven-stringed instrument,
> Unless I meant thee to beseech me play?"

The poet refers first to the organ of Corti, in the internal ear, which contains some three thousand arches, its keys ranged like those of a piano, aptly described "as hungry for music." The seven-stringed instrument is the light and the seven colours of the spectrum, which, falling upon the retina, are translated into sight and colour impressions by the optic nerve and the brain centres. Browning did not despise these marvellous works of the Creator like a materialist scientist, whose field of vision is limited by the walls of his laboratory; with a true poet's instinct he saw what the physiologist failed to see—from too much light perhaps.

Hereditary transmission of disease is another charge which the Atheist brings against God; but heredity works both ways, and on the whole immensely for the progress of the race. If the parent could transmit no store of health, vigour, and virtue to his child, the world could make no

[1] "Two Camels."

greater progress than that of the individual; every child would have to begin life, civilization, and education for himself; as it is, we for the most part start with the funded property of the race behind us; and if now and then we start bankrupt or weighted with a load of debt, the law may appear to work cruelly in such cases; but on the whole it is a merciful and beneficial law.

The Creator could not make all His creatures perfectly happy at all times and under all circumstances consistently with His plan of probation in this life for moral beings. He could have made them automata, and endowed them with happiness; but consistently with the process of educating the moral nature, it is impossible to see how perfect happiness in this life could be always assured. Because the moral order seems to represent a perfectly wise, just, loving, and omnipotent God very imperfectly, it is concluded that the Supreme Being must be defective in one or other of these qualities.

But this, as Browning in a hundred places shows, does not follow. It is our partial vision, our imperfect understanding of His ways, and our defective philosophy which lead to such a conclusion. Evil, sin, pain, and sorrow are mysteries, but the poet shows that they are not inconsistent with the reign of a loving, an all-wise and omnipotent God. A distinguished

theologian has admirably stated the case in the following questions—

"Had God been an unrighteous Being Himself, would He have given to the obviously superior faculty in man so distinct and authoritative a voice on the side of righteousness? Would He have so constructed the creatures of our species as to have planted in every breast a reclaiming witness against Himself? Would He have thus inscribed on the tablet of every heart the sentence of His own condemnation? And is this not just as likely, as that He should have inscribed it in written characters on the forehead of each individual? Would He so have fashioned the workmanship of His own hands? or, if a God of cruelty, injustice, and falsehood, would He have placed in the station of master and judge that faculty which, felt to be the highest in our nature, would prompt a generous and high-minded revolt of all our sentiments against the Being who formed us? From a God possessed of such characteristics we should surely have expected a differently-moulded humanity; or, in other words, from the actual constitution of man, from the testimonies on the side of all righteousness, given by the vicegerent within the heart, do we infer the righteousness of the Sovereign who placed it there."[1]

[1] Dr. Chalmers' *Natural Theology*, vol. i., pp. 323-4.

Is such a conception of Supreme Righteousness as this merely an invention of priests to subserve their own purposes of keeping mankind in awe of their supposed power with the Divinity? Could it have arisen out of an awe of the powers of nature, or wonder at the phenomena of the elements? Did savage man evolve from his inner consciousness such a conception of Justice and Truth answering to his own innate love for these characteristics? Mr. Huxley somewhere says that "men make their gods after their own likeness, in their own image make they them." Then if the God of Christians has been evolved from the noblest conceptions of the noblest men, He cannot be a God of cruelty such as Mr. Mill postulates; unless indeed He be defective in the attributes most esteemed by His creature man, and then He is inferior to him, which is absurd.

"The primitive idea of God, as developed in the Psalms and Book of Job," says Herder, "is that of a *House-Father*—a Being always at work, who keeps everything going by daily continual interlocution. He is the Father of the dew, giving snow like wool, and scattering the hoar-frost like ashes. He is one who takes all creatures under His individual superintendence. His mercies are over all His works. Nothing is too small for God's care, nothing too feeble. . . . He hears the young, ungainly ravens who call upon

Him. He helps the wild-goat in the time of her solitary, painful travail. To Him there is nothing that is savage, dumb, despised. The lions, roaming after their prey, seek their meat from Him. Of the wild ass it is said—'God has made his home in the wilderness, and the barren land his dwelling.' The hawk flies through His wisdom; through Him the eagle makes his nest on high. Even the great deep, the abode of monsters, is His; He loves the hateful crocodile. Behemoth is the chief of his ways, *i. e.* His excellent masterpiece."

The God of Christianity is a Personal God. As Dr. Martineau puts the matter, we worship "a Divine Mind and Will, ruling the universe, and holding moral relations with mankind." Did Browning hold the doctrine of a personal God? It has been held by students of the poet that the tenor of his teaching is inconsistent with the idea of personality in the Supreme Being in any meaning of the word "personal" that is intelligible to us. Mr. Bury, in an essay entitled *Browning's Philosophy*, says, "God is not limited by time, nor by space—compare *The Ring and the Book:* 'The Pope,' l. 1317,

> 'There (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!),
> In the absolute immensity,'—

and thus personality applied to Him in our sense has no meaning: personal is a completely

inadequate and therefore misleading term—'speech must babble thus!' Even supposing—a supposition which seems to me to have no basis, and to be due to superficial study—Browning does teach a personal God, his God is at all events a Being of a glorious kind whom we could feel glad to worship, far different from the diabolical God or divine Devil whom many are still taught to praise and pray to."[1]

Mr. Bury's very partial quotation from *The Pope* does not suffice to explain Browning's meaning. He makes the Pontiff say, in his address to God—

> "O Thou,—as represented here to me
> In such conception as my soul allows,—
> Under Thy measureless, my atom width!
> . . . . . .
> Our known unknown, our God revealed to man.
> Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;
> Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense,—
> There (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!),
> In the absolute immensity, the whole
> Appreciable solely by Thyself,—
> Here, by the little mind of man, reduced
> To littleness that suits his faculty,
> In the degree appreciable too."[2]

Man's mind, as a convex glass, gathers the scattered points of the immensity to re-unite them, and so obtains such a personal God from

[1] *Browning Studies*, p. 41.
[2] *The Ring and the Book*: "The Pope," ll. 1308-23.

the Infinite as is suited to his limited capacity. Having no power to conceive the Abstract, he is forced to accept a Concrete idea of God. But this is no argument against a Personal Supreme Being. Browning seems to have had in his mind, in writing the above passage, the words of St. Thomas Aquinas when he anticipated and answered Spinoza's objection that God is necessarily limited by being defined. He puts the objection: "What is *here and not there*, is finite as to place; therefore, what is *this and not that* is finite as to substance. But God is *this and not that*, for He is neither wood nor stone; and therefore He is not infinite as to substance." He replies: "The fact that the Being of God subsists in itself, and not in any subject, shows that His infinity is different from all other infinities. If whiteness subsisted by itself, it would by that fact alone be distinct from all whiteness existing in subjects."[1]

"Personality," says Lotze, in reply to Strauss, "is not founded on the distinction of self from a not-self, but on self-subsistence, which self-consciousness affirms, without reference to that which is not self. The Personality of God, therefore, does not necessarily involve the distinction by God of Himself from what is not Himself, and so does not imply His limitation or finiteness; on the contrary, perfect personality is to

[1] *Summa*, Pt. I., Qu. vii., Art. 1.

be found only in God, while in all finite spirits there exists only a weak imitation of personality. The finiteness of the finite is not a productive condition of personality, but rather a hindering barrier to its perfect development."[1] St. Thomas again, says—"'Person' expresses that which is most perfect in nature, subsistence in a rational nature. As, then, we should predicate of God all that is most perfect, since His Essence contains every perfection of creatures, we must predicate personality of Him, not as of creatures, but in the higher sense in which attributes of creatures are applied to God."[2]

[1] *Mikrokosmus*, vol. iii., p. 576.

[2] *Summa*, Pt. I., Qu. xxxix., Art. 3. See these and other notes on the subject in Hettinger's *Natural Religion*, pp. 170-171.

CHAPTER II

JESUS CHRIST: GOD AND MAN

BROWNING teaches that man knows God, but chooses to ignore Him. The child, the savage, the natural man recognize God in some form or other. "All know, none is ignorant,"[1] of this fact at least.

> "But man Ignores—thanks to Thee
> Who madest him know."[2]

Atheism implies, therefore, either a defect in the reasoning power, some hypertrophy of one side of the thinking capacity which obscures the faculty by which we apprehend God, or the affectation of a superior intellect which puts us above the "common herd," who are content with the generally-accepted teaching about the Supreme Being. Such persons, by the misuse of the reasoning faculty God has given them, ignore the Creator of the reason, choosing to say there is no God. Probably few, if any, dogmatic Atheists exist; Agnosticism is the fashion of the

[1] *Parleyings with Fust and his Friends.* [2] *Ibid.*

day. Merely to know God intellectually, though it may prove that we possess sound reasoning faculties, will not satisfy our hearts. We may believe in the existence of a God, and deny that He has revealed Himself to us; we are then Deists. We may believe in a personal God, and then we are called Theists. "Theism may be as serious an obstacle to the reception of the Christian Gospel as Atheism; for the God of many Theists is a God so remote from man that it is inconceivable to them that He should have become Man at the impulse of an infinite love for our race, and should have lived a life of conflict and of suffering, and died a death of shame and horror for our salvation."[1] The belief that this Personal God has revealed Himself to us in the Person of Jesus Christ constitutes a belief in Christianity, and this was the faith which Browning held. The poems *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day* are meaningless if they do not express their author's belief in the divinity of our Lord and His atoning sacrifice. Christ is no fable or myth to Browning; for the Göttingen professor who taught that doctrine he prays—

"May Christ do for him what no mere man shall,
And stand confessed as the God of salvation!"[2]

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[1] Dr. Dale's *Christian Doctrine*, p. 40.
[2] *Christmas Eve.*

Christ Jesus, very Man and very God. The Christian belief concerning the Natures and Person of Jesus Christ is that He is "God the Son made man for us." He has, therefore, two natures: that of God and that of man. Is this the creed of Robert Browning? Undoubtedly it is. If from the many passages in the poet's works in which he speaks of our Blessed Lord we take this one or that, it is possible to urge that Browning is not speaking in his own person, but dramatically through his characters, and it is undeniable that this or that particular quotation may not express the poet's religious belief. But if we go through his whole works, and note down all the references to the Person and work of Jesus Christ, it is, I think, impossible to come to any other conclusion than that Browning was a believer in the divinity of our Lord. In *Pauline*, which, as I have explained, was the poet's first work, he addresses our Lord in the most impassioned and devout terms—

> "O thou pale form! . . . .
> Oft have I stood by thee—
> Have I been keeping lonely watch with thee
> In the damp night by weeping Olivet,
> Or leaning on thy bosom, proudly less,
> Or dying with thee on the lonely cross,
> Or witnessing thy bursting from the tomb."

In *The Ring and the Book*, which was published when the poet was fifty-six, we have

his mature utterances, and in the character of the Pope it is impossible to doubt that Browning speaks his own thought, just as he does in *Rabbi Ben Ezra.* The Pope, communing with God, reflects that the Infinite chose this one earth out of all the multitude of peopled worlds for stage and scene of His transcendent act, beside which even creation is but a puny exercise of power. This story of the redemption of man by Jesus Christ he loves with his heart, and finds it not contrary to his reason. The conception of God as only all-powerful and all-wise is "an isoscele deficient in the base."

> "What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
> But just the instance which this tale supplies
> Of love without a limit?"[1]

Limitless is the power, boundless the intelligence, let love be unlimited in its self-sacrifice—

> "Then is the tale true, and God shows complete,"

the Pope says. Beyond the tale of this transcendent love he reaches into the dark, feels what he cannot see, and still faith stands. Whether the Incarnation be a fact, absolute independent truth, and not merely truth reverberate made to pass into the mind of man, the same truth in a new form, "what matter so intelligence be filled?" He is not perplexed by the difficulties raised by

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1395-70.

critics concerning the transmission of the gospel story, nor with the riddles set to solve. The very difficulties of the narrative are but as those of life; we must march over obstacles we compel to give way before us; the moral sense grows but by exercise; there would be no progress in the world did solid, bare truth always confront us. The unceasing criticism of the Sacred Narrative keeps the life and work of the Lord Jesus ever before the minds of men; the efforts to destroy the faith serve but to make it stronger and grow more vigorously, just as grass by cutting and rolling becomes rich and compact. In the exquisitely beautiful poem *Christmas Eve* is a description of the midnight mass at St. Peter's at Rome, in which Christ is represented as

> "He who trod,
> Very man and very God,
> This earth in weakness, shame, and pain;"

dying on the cross, but to come again "the One God, All in all, King of kings, Lord of lords."

In the companion poem, *Easter Day*, Christ is addressed as "Thou Love of God!" Christ speaks of Himself as the One who created man and underwent death in his stead in flesh like his. Christ demands to know why this is doubted. Is it upon the ground that in the

story too much love had been found? How could God love so?

> "Believe in Me,
> Who lived and died, yet essentially
> Am Lord of Life."[1]

Again, in the powerful and remarkable poem *An Epistle of Karshish*, the Arab physician, who, travelling through Palestine soon after the death of our Lord, has heard the story of Jesus and how He raised Lazarus from the dead, and writes it all as a medical case for the benefit of his old teacher, exclaims—

> "The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too."

Can he imagine the Creator in human form, with a beating, loving heart like a man's, with sympathizing face like the human face, with love heaven-sent, with God's own self to love, crying to him—

> "And thou must love Me, who have died for thee."

So said Lazarus did the One who raised him from the tomb say to him. Then in the beautiful and touching poem *A Death in the Desert*—which describes the last scenes in the life of the aged disciple John, whom Jesus loved; who lay on His breast at the last paschal supper; who stood by the cross; who saw the awful vision of

[1] *Christmas Eve.*

Patmos; and who now lies dying in a cave, hiding from the bloody hands of the persecutors of the followers of Christ—we have the testimony of the beloved disciple to the truth as it is in Jesus set down for us by a poet who must have believed and loved the story, to have given it to us in words that burn with the love of Christ, and which are redolent of the odour of Christian sanctity. If Browning were not a believer in the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity when he wrote this exquisite poem, or if he were merely uttering dramatically words such as St. John might have spoken, then the poet must forfeit his claim to be considered what he has always been held to be—a religious teacher with a definite message to his age. The beloved disciple, as he presses his finger on the leaden plate on which is traced the text, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," declares that "the love that tops the might" is "the Christ in God."

> "I say the acknowledgment of God in Christ
> Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
> All questions in the earth and out of it."

In the poem entitled *Saul*[1] we have perhaps the noblest of all Mr. Browning's religious poems. It is a Messianic oratorio in words. David is shown to us charming away the melancholy of Saul by his music and prophecy. In a

[1] *Dramatic Lyrics.*

magnificent prophetic outburst the sweet singer of Israel proclaims "the Christ that is to be"—

> "O Saul, it shall be
> A Face like my face that receives thee ; a Man like to me,
> Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever ; a Hand like this hand
> Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee ! See the Christ stand ! "

In a poem in *Ferishtah's Fancies* entitled "The Sun," the poet tells how a student had once reported that there was a story that "God once assumed on earth a human shape." The Arab teacher explained that in days of ignorance men took the sun for God. "Let it be considered as the symbol of the Supreme," said the Dervish. Suppose the sun to be the Author of life and light; when we eat fruit we praise the grower and so on, up to the sun, which gathers to itself all love and praise. The sun is fire, and more beside. Are we to expend our love on fire? If we must thank it, there must be purpose with the power—a humanity like our own. We cannot thank insentient things. Man's soul can only be moved by kindred soul. We lack a union of fire with flesh; perhaps the greatly-yearned-for once befell: "perhaps the sun was flesh once." As the divine element of fire is imprisoned in the earthly flint—hard as it is to conceive the relationship between fire and flint—so God was once incarnate in the form of man,

and this some find it harder to believe. Christ is evidently referred to in the lines—

"He, the Truth, is, too, the Word."[1]

"The Great Word which makes all things new."[2]

He is

"The Star which chose to stoop and stay for us."[3]

He is

"That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose;"[4]

for the Christ of to-day is a far higher conception than any which the critics think they have dispelled. Pompilia, in *The Ring and the Book*,[5] says Christ was "likest God in being born." It is such pure souls as hers who can assimilate a sublime truth like the Incarnation while philosophers stumble at it. Yet for those who cannot accept the divinity of Christ, Browning has no words but those of sympathy. For example, in the story of the German professor lecturing on the Christ-myth at Göttingen. Full of philosophic reverence, the critic reduces the pearl of great price to dust and ashes; yet just as the audience expected him to bid them sweep the

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 376-77.
[2] *Dramatic Lyrics:* "By the Fireside."
[3] Epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ.*
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] l. 1691.

refuse of the precious pearl into its natural dust-hole, he bids them gather up every fragment, for he has proved by analysis that it is after all a real pearl, and too precious to be lost even in its disintegrated condition.

"So prize we our dust and ashes accordingly!"[1]

and he dismisses his pupils thus—

"Go home and venerate the myth
I have thus experimented with—
This man, continue to adore him
Rather than all who went before him,
And all who ever followed after!"

Probably the critics who have laboured incessantly to destroy the idea of the divinity of Christ have done infinitely more to strengthen the hold of the Christian world on the doctrine of the Incarnation, and increase the faith of devout minds in our Lord's divinity, than all the treatises on the orthodox side put together. Few religious-minded persons can have read Renan's *Life of Jesus* without feeling that if Christ were not God, His life at this stage of the world's history could by no possibility have the vitalizing force and the love-compelling power that Renan's pages everywhere disclose. If some ill-balanced minds have lost their faith for a while through the *Life of Jesus*, thousands of minds of stronger fibre

[1] *Christmas Eve.*

have found in it additional reason for believing that "never man spake like this man," never was mansuetude enshrined before in such consummate power and beauty. To know God as the Theist knows Him may suffice for pure spirits, for those who have never sinned, suffered, nor felt the need of a Saviour; but for fallen and sinful men the Christ of Christianity is an imperative necessity, and those who have never surrendered themselves to Him have never known what it is to experience the rest He gives to the heavy-laden soul. Men tell us that "Christianity is played out": perhaps in one sense it is—"The Face decomposes but to recompose."[1] When in the history of Christianity was the Face of the Master so gloriously beautiful as it is to-day? When was the atmosphere through which the world beheld it so clear? Time was when through clouds and mists of ignorance and superstition men fancied they saw an approving smile on the face of their Christ as they heaped the faggots round the stake, where their fellow-believer in the Son of God's love perished by fire. Time was when they were convinced that they beheld a gesture of assent on that all-loving countenance, while they racked and mangled, in His name, their fellow-men who pronounced not their shibboleths.

That aspect of the Christ-Face is decomposed

[1] Epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ*.

for ever. Never more will men dare in Its name to torture and destroy their fellow-men for a diphthong or a metaphysical theory. The conception of Christ in these days amounts to a re-discovery. It was enough at one time to profess a creed to entitle a man to be called Christian: we are beginning to see that Christianity is something to be lived, not wrangled about and fought over.

The Epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ*, already referred to, consists of three parts. Three speakers, "as David," "as Renan," and the poet himself, estimate for us the high-water mark of the faith of their day. "The First Speaker as David" points to the Feast of the Dedication of Solomon's Temple, when the presence of the Lord filled the house with the glory of His cloud. "Rejoice in the God whose mercy endureth for ever," sang the multitude with one voice. This was the highest point reached by the purest Theism of the Hebrew people. "The temple filled with a cloud." No Face was there to be distinguished; God's presence was felt not seen. A religion of types, of shadows, of prophecies and symbols, which even at the best did not prevent the Jews from lapsing into polytheism from time to time, was but the preparation for the coming of Christ; yet for four thousand years, continually and without variation, that advent was foretold. David, in Browning's poem *Saul*, is made to

prophesy the coming Christ—his own flesh in the Godhead. He says, in words we have already quoted—

> "A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
> Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever."

Whether David be the author or only the editor of the wonderful body of prayer and praise which for all time will perfectly express the deepest aspirations and the highest devotion of the human heart in every land, it is certain that the Psalms again and again prophesy the Christ who was to come.

Strauss, in his *Life of Jesus*, admitted that "in Him all the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament were to find their fulfilment; otherwise he could not have corresponded to the Messianic idea, already delineated by the Jews"; although a few years later he said there were no Messianic prophecies, "but simply a presentiment among the leading minds of the Jewish nation that there would be in the future a great development of the religion of Jehovah." Browning's picture of David preaching the Coming Christ to Saul proves that the poet believed the Messianic prophecies of the Psalms pointed to their fulfilment in our Lord. What are termed the Messianic Psalms are ii., xxi., xxii., xlv.,

lxxii., cx. But there are many more Messianic prophecies in the Psalms than these.[1]

The expectation of the Messiah confronts us at every stage of the public ministry of Christ as given in the Gospel story; there was nothing vague or misty about the character of the expected Saviour as it was conceived in the minds of the Jews, and Browning has not exceeded the bounds of probability in putting into the lips of David the description of Him who should "thus open the gates of new life" to heavy and stricken souls. There must have been thousands of devout Jews in the ages preceding the coming of our Lord who had expectations, conceptions, and clear visions of the real character of the expected deliverer. Nothing in the history of the literature of the world can be found so miraculous as the four thousand years of prophecy which pointed to Christ and was minutely fulfilled in Him. But non-inspired writings, even pagan predictions, foretold His advent. In a poem in the *Asolando* volume, Browning refers to the well-known prophecies of Christ in some sibylline books. The poem is entitled "*Imperante Augusto Natus Est*"; the question is asked by a Roman of his friend in the reign of Augustus Octavianus Cæsar—

[1] See the Oxford *Helps to the Study of the Bible* for a table of the "Prophecies relating to Christ," pp. 197-98.

"Are even Gods so safe?
Jupiter that just now is dominant—
Are not there ancient dismal tales how once
A predecessor reigned ere Saturn came,
And who can say if Jupiter be last?
Was it for nothing the grey Sibyl wrote
'Cæsar Augustus regnant, shall be born
In blind Judæa'—one to master him,
Him and the universe?"

This story is from Suidas, who narrates the visit of Augustus Cæsar to the oracle at Delphos. "When Augustus had sacrificed," said Suidas, "he demanded of the Pythia who should succeed him, and the oracle replied—

"'A Hebrew slave, holding control over the blessed gods,
Orders me to leave this home and return to the underworld,
Depart in silence, therefore, from our altars.'"

It is said that when Augustus returned to Rome after receiving this reply, he erected an altar in the Capitol, with the inscription, "Ara Primogeniti Dei." On this spot now stands the Church of S. Maria in Aracœli, a very ancient building.[1]

Tacitus declared that "men from Judea would found an universal empire."[2] Suetonius

[1] See Jeremy Taylor's *Life of Christ*, § iv.; Sueton., *In Vitâ Vespas.*, c. 4; Cic., *De Divin.;* Suidas, *In Histor. Verb.*, "Augustus"; and Mrs. Jameson's *Legends of the Madonna*, p. 197.

[2] *Annals*, v. 13.

wrote that there was "throughout the East an ancient, unchanging tradition that men out of Judea would found a new and universal empire."[1] Cicero said ancient prophecies foretold the coming of a King to whom men must do homage in order that they may be saved; and he asks himself who would this be, and when He should come?[2] Virgil sings this glorious new age which the Sibyl foretold when a mysterious babe should be born—

> "The Son shall lead the life of gods, and be
> By gods and heroes seen, and gods and heroes see.
> The jarring nations he in peace shall bind,
> And with paternal virtues rule mankind."[3]

The heathen world could only have gathered this tradition from the Jews, whose sacred books from their first pages to their last were full of prophecies of the "Comer." Browning, in the poem, *Wanting is—What?* which stands as the Prologue to the *Jocoseria* volume, says—

> "Come then, complete incompletion, O Comer,
> Pant through the blueness,"

i. e. descend from heaven. The title, "The Comer" (ὁ ἐρχόμενος), in the New Testament is one of the titles of the Messiah. "The Face" of the Christ was perfected century by century

[1] *In Vita Vespas.*, c. 4.
[2] *De Divin.*, ii. 54.
[3] Dryden's Virgil, *Eclog.* iv.

as the ages rolled on, till merging from the cloud of the Old Dispensation, Jesus, the Saviour of the world, was manifested in the flesh.

If no such person as Jesus Christ existed, or if He were historical, but in any way failed to conform to the character given to Him in the Gospels, the evolution of the Christ-myth in the first two centuries is the greatest miracle the world ever saw. His age was a literary, highly-cultured age. Myths are developed amongst barbarous and primitive peoples, but the age of the Cæsars was unfavourable to the evolution of such a myth from such mean elements. To argue that Christ never existed, or that He was a mere Jewish peasant with a knowledge of occult arts, or of hypnotism and psychological medicine, is to say that some biographer or story-teller existed in the first centuries who created out of little or nothing a character which for beauty, persuasive power, compelling love, and conquering grace has subdued the most enlightened and the noblest races of mankind for nearly two thousand years as their lawful Sovereign in things temporal and eternal.

Is this Divine Face, as men tell us, slowly receding into the dark mist from which IT emerged through prophecy into human form? that Divine Person dissolving away of whom the Beloved Apostle could say, "Which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which

we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of Life"?[1]

Says Renan, the "Second Speaker" of the Epilogue—

> "Gone now! All gone across the dark so far,
> Sharpening fast, shuddering ever, shutting still,
> Dwindling into the distance, dies that star
> Which came, stood, opened once!"

With sorrowful hearts we gazed on a Face as real as our own sad ones; we turned towards the star that began to move away from our homage and human tribute.

> "Awhile transpired
> Some vestige of a Face no pangs convulse,
> No prayer retard; then even this was gone,
> Lost in the night at last."[2]

Lone and desolate through the long ages, we try to probe again the darkening vault in which remains only the faint glimmer of lesser lights, while we search in vain, orphaned and heart-stricken, for "the star which chose to stoop and stay for us." And so our hope evanished,

> "We shall not look up, know ourselves are seen,
> Speak, and be sure that we again are heard."[3]

And as we act and suffer, no longer will the star "reflect our life," no longer will it "absorb our earthly flame." Our Christ is gone!

[1] 1 John i. 1.
[2] Epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ*. [3] *Ibid.*

Such are Browning's reflections on the more reverent destructive criticism of the Gospels, and every reader of Renan's *Life of Jesus* will admit that the poet correctly interprets his attitude. But have Renan, Strauss, Baur, and the rationalist critics of the Tübingen school taken away our Lord and left us orphans? At the worst, what is their theory? They differ widely amongst themselves, but they seem to agree that the Synoptic Gospels, *i. e.* Matthew, Mark, and Luke, though of an earlier date than John, are, in their present form, not entirely the work of the authors whose names they bear, and that the Gospel of John is not the work of the Apostle of that name. Baur dates the Gospel of Matthew 130—134 A.D., Mark after Matthew, Luke about 100 A.D., and John 150—170 A.D. Renan, on the other hand, does not differ nearly so widely from the orthodox dates. He gives the year 45 A.D. as about the date of Matthew's discourses; Mark's Gospel he dates after 67 A.D., Luke's after 70 A.D., and John's between 95 and 100 A.D. Renan holds that our Lord's discourses in Matthew are authentic, but thinks the narrative portion is by a later writer, who perhaps based his work on Mark's Gospel. He does not doubt that the authorship of the second and third Gospels is correctly attributed to the persons whose names they bear; and the fourth Gospel he thinks is founded on an authentic

work of John, and was published by his disciples at the end of the first century. The orthodox critics date Matthew's original Aramaic Gospel between 42 and 67 A.D., and that of its Greek translation 67—80 A.D.; Mark's Gospel not later than 67 A.D., Luke's not later than 80 A.D., and John's 90—100 A.D. So far there is no very great divergence between Renan's dates and those of the Catholic critics. Where, however, they do differ, and that widely, is in their theory that there were other Gospels, some of them now lost, which were by the Church in the first ages considered of equal or even greater authority to that of the Gospels we now possess. The teaching of these last Gospels, it is suggested, may probably have differed from each other as widely as Loyola's doctrine differed from Luther's. The Gospels as we now possess them are by the Tübingen school concluded to be Conciliatory Gospels, that is to say, made up by the Church of the second century out of older and opposing Gospels, so edited and arranged as to present a consistent story of the life and teaching of Christ. It is urged that no Gospel, whether accepted or rejected by the Early Church, exists in its original form, but is a product of the development of Christian doctrine modified from time to time to meet the dogmatic requirements of the faith as it gradually assumed its orthodox form. Thus in ages when

literary honesty and accurate criticism were unknown, words would be added and phrases modified according as the theology of the period might seem to require readjustment. Against these theories it is opposed that the teaching of the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline, Petrine, and other Epistles, and the Epistles of the Apostolic Fathers, are in harmony with the whole body of teaching of the four Gospels. History is silent as to any such violently-opposed doctrines amongst the Christians of the first and second centuries as those of Loyola and Luther in modern times. There is nothing in the works of the historians and fathers of the first ages to show that there was any necessity for the compilation of Conciliatory Gospels, whose aim was the formation of a body of Christian doctrine harmoniously put together out of divergent and contradictory documents written by opposing partisans. The Church of the second century was therefore not the outcome of a fusion of parties, but the natural foundation of the Apostles on Christ Himself.[1]

Rationalistic criticism has expended much of its energy on the Gospel of John. Baur (1847) declared it to be a religious ideal poem composed

[1] I am indebted to the Appendix to Hettinger's *Revealed Religion*, by the Rev. Henry Cator, for the arguments on the Tübingen Theory. See also Dr. Lightfoot's *St. Paul and the Three.*

in the second century. Many German writers accepted this theory, so that it has become almost the fashion with the broader school of the Church to look upon this Gospel as having little, if any, historical importance. Browning, in *A Death in the Desert*, makes the Beloved Apostle say, as he lay dying in his cave near Ephesus, that men would one day ask—

> "Was John at all, and did he say he saw?
> Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!"

It is argued that the Fourth Gospel could not have been written by the Beloved Apostle John, because its style differs so greatly from that of the Book of Revelation, whose author has been identified from very early times with the Apostle John. The purer Greek, the spiritual character of the Gospel, the different plane of intellectuality, and other internal evidence, lead us to believe that the rugged style of the Apocalypse is due to quite other authorship than that of the Fourth Gospel. If we suppose that the Book of Revelation antedates the Gospel by some thirty years, it might have been possible, though it is not considered probable, that the literary style, philosophic and spiritual thought of the writer of the Gospel was developed from that of the author of the Apocalypse. If thirty years elapsed between the two compositions, this, as we have said, may have been the case; but if only twenty

years, or less as some hold, divided the Apocalypse period from the Fourth Gospel period of writing, the difficulty in believing both to be the work of the same hand is greatly increased. Browning, in *A Death in the Desert*, shows us John companioned by five of his disciples, who tenderly nursed the dying saint, who did not pass from the world till 98 A.D., or even later. His Gospel, graven on plates of lead, lies by his side, and it may well have been that his Gospel at that date did not exist as we have it now; but was simply a record of the words and deeds of Jesus, which at a later date was enlarged and developed by more cultivated scholars, who had been in their youth disciples of that John who

> "Saw with his eyes, and handled with his hands,
> That which was from the first, the Word of Life."[1]

This, the worst which modern criticism, even if historically substantiated, can do, is very far indeed from destroying or to any serious extent impairing the value of the Fourth Gospel. Browning makes the hero of *A Death in the Desert* a profound metaphysician; he is full of Alexandrian philosophy, as becomes the author of the Johannine Gospel; he speaks as Browning would have spoken had the time been eighteen hundred years later and the circumstances identical. It is demanded, when he tells of the

[1] *A Death in the Desert.*

love of the Lord Jesus and all His work for man, "Did not we ourselves imagine and make this love?" In other words, love having been discovered by mankind to be the noblest thing on earth, have not men created a God of Infinite Love out of their own passionate imagining of what man's love would be if perfectly developed and allied to omnipotence? Has not man projected his own love heavenward, and does it not fall back upon him in another shape—with another name and story added? This explains what the poet means in the Renan speech in the Epilogue referred to. It may have been that "the star which chose to stoop and stay for us" was but the projection of man's passionate yearning for a central point of love like his own, embodied in the heaven to which he turned his longing eyes. But as David asks in *Saul*—

> "Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
> That I doubt His own love can compete with it?"

The man who rejects Christ because he thinks the love of Christ is only a projection of his own love, is like a lamp that overswims with oil, a stomach overloaded with nourishment; that man's soul dies. His death comes to him in the shape of loss from his gain; he has extracted darkness from the light given to him, ignorance from the knowledge poured upon him, and from the manifestation of love has elaborated the lack

of love. By "The Comfort, Christ,"[1] "not by the Grandeur, God," has the last appeal to man's heart been made; and from the moment when "a thief said the last kind word to Christ,"[2] His influence has turned hearts of adamant to warm flesh, and has softened and subdued the most hardened criminal.

> "No one ever plucked
> A rag, even, from the body of the Lord,
> To wear and mock with, but, despite himself,
> He looked the greater and was the better."[3]

But what shall we say of those who gave themselves up to the love of Christ in the ages immediately succeeding the consummation of love's sacrifice, while the Face shone in the Soul's heaven in all its glory? Let us turn to the Early Christian apologists, and learn what the love of Christ did for the heathen world in the first centuries.

Justin Martyr[4] says—"Those who were lately the slaves of sensual passion, as was the case with myself, have now no ambition other than to lead pure and holy lives; those who but yesterday were given to the practices of sorcery and the art of magic, are to-day consecrated to the service of the eternal and unbegotten God; those

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "Giuseppe Caponsacchi," l. 2096.

[2] *Ibid.*, l. 869. [3] *Ibid.*, ll. 211-14.

[4] Justin, *Apolog.*, I., c. 14; *conf.* c. 15—17.

who as Pagans prized wealth above everything else, as Christians distribute all they have to the poor; those who formerly despised persons of any other nationality but their own, ridiculed their customs, and would hold no intercourse with them, live, since the birth of Christ in their souls, in peace with their enemies, and offer prayers and do other kind offices for those who hate and persecute them."

The author of the letter to Diognetus[1] says—"The Christians live in the world as pilgrims in a strange land; they share all their goods with their fellow-pilgrims, and bear up with fortitude amid all adversities . . . Obeying and respecting all law, they are also, by reason of their exemplary lives, above every law. They love man, notwithstanding that men persecute them."

"You find fault with us," says Tertullian[2] to the Pagans, "because we love and you hate each other; because we are ready to die for one another, while you are always on the point of destroying each other; because the spirit of fraternal love leads among us to a community of goods, while among you it is precisely such earthly possessions that are the cause of your enmities. You think it incredible that we, possessing everything else in common, should except

[1] *Epist. ad Diognet.*, c. 5.
[2] Tertullian, *Apolog.*, c. 39.

our wives, while among you these constitute the only community of goods."

Origen says[1]—"There is not a Christian community which has not been exempted from a thousand vices and a thousand passions. Compared with contemporary Pagans, the disciples of Christ shine like stars in the firmament."

Gentle, pacific, pure, and chaste, these Early Christians were distinguished by the heroic courage and noble fortitude with which they endured the most agonizing and terrible forms of persecution and death.

No, not gone the Face of the Divine Lover! The Renans have clouded our sky with a little of their critical smoke; some of us have lost the heavenly vision for a while—but not Browning—

> "That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
> Or decomposes but to recompose,
> Become my universe that feels and knows."[2]

And thus it is that the story of Christ constantly creates a real belief in the existence of God. Some students of Browning profess to have found abundant evidence of the poet's Theism, but little of his definite, dogmatic Christianity. I incline to think this must have been due to an imperfect acquaintance with the

[1] Origen, *Contr. Cels.*, I. 67, III. 29.

[2] Epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ:* "Third Speaker."

poet's works as a whole. It has always seemed to me that Browning leads us to form our conception of God by insisting on the revelation of the Divine in the Person of Jesus Christ. The sympathetic student will have no difficulty in believing that Browning held the doctrine of the Atonement.

CHAPTER III

MAN

To Browning, man is not "a brute with the same beginning, and therefore the same end, as all that lives around him." He does not represent merely "the sum-total of his parents and ancestry, of conditions of time and place, air and climate, food and clothing." His thought is not merely "a vibration of the cerebral substance." Thought is not phosphorus, and consciousness is not a mere material property. Digestion in the stomach is not a similar force to the power of thinking in the brain. But this is what the materialists tell us about man, and tell us so persistently that the world largely believes them. To Browning man is "a god, though in the germ,"[1] "man, for aye removed from the developed brute."[2]

In *Cleon* the poet imagines how a Greek philosophical poet mused "upon the scheme of earth and man in chief," contemplating "all

[1] *Rabbi Ben Ezra.* [2] *Ibid.*

earth's tenantry from worm to bird." Before the advent of man all was seen perfect, and a scientific beholder could have deduced the perfectness of other creatures yet unseen. Had the Creator then questioned such a spectator of the animal life he saw around him, it is conceivable that God might have asked him—

> "Shall I go on a step, improve on this,
> Do more for visible creatures than is done?"

Had a competent naturalist been thus addressed, he might reasonably have answered that there was nothing left to do but make "each grow conscious in himself"; in every other way all is perfection, the shell-fish sticks fast to the rock, the fish swims, the snake both swims and slides, the beasts range the forests, and the birds the air, "life's mechanics can no further go." The Creator's finger endues each with lifelike fire, all is exquisitely perfect—

> "But 'tis pure fire, and they mere matter are;
> It has them, not they it; and so I choose
> For man, thy last premeditated work
> (If I might add a glory to the scheme),
> That a third thing should stand apart from both,
> A quality arise within his soul,
> Which, intro-active, made to supervise
> And feel the force it has, may view itself,
> And so be happy."

The man at first might live the animal life;

but there is more in him than this: let him begin to learn how he lives; let him know something of his adaptabilities, thus will his life become more joy-giving, and man possessed of such a faculty is better than the animals; he is of created things on earth the best. Man progresses because he is not merely "a better beast." His failures began

> "Only since he left
> The lower and inconscious forms of life."

Without failure there can be no advance. The brutes have perfection of a sort; man alone advances because he is imperfect; he takes "each step higher over the brute's head" by adding new learning to the old. There is a "world of capability" in man, "and still the soul craves all"; yet life is inadequate to the joy it demands, the soul sees the joy but can never grasp it. The soul sees God's joy, but can only use her own. It is no mere poet's dream that some future state may await us

> "Unlimited in capability
> For joy, as this is in desire for joy."

The joy-hunger forces us to pursue it, till freed by death we burst as the worm into the fly, who while still a worm wants his wings.

Browning has left us a wonderful and most remarkable example of his genius in the dying

speech of his Paracelsus.[1] The man of science in his last moments has a vision of Creation. He tells his faithful friend Festus how all Nature is "hungry for joy." How God Himself

> "Tastes an infinite joy
> In infinite ways—one everlasting bliss,
> From whom all being emanates, all power
> Proceeds; in whom is life for evermore,
> Yet whom existence in its lowest form
> Includes."

The poet traces the history of the earth from its central fires, its volcanic eruptions, and its glacial period, till it becomes the verdant home of the savage creatures. God joys in the fine sand where sunbeams bask, tastes a pleasure in the uncouth pride of the young volcanoes, renews His ancient rapture while the wild creatures seek their loves in wood and plain, dwelling in all, from minutest insect up to the consummation of this scheme of being—Man. Scattered o'er the world the attributes of man had asked to be combined, united in a wondrous whole, imperfect qualities distributed here and there in numberless species had suggested some one creature yet to make in whom all the scattered rays should converge into the faculties of man. In man should be power, not to be used blindly, nor always to be controlled by perfect know-

[1] *Paracelsus.*

ledge; the force at his command must be used at risk; hope should inspire, and fear should check the power with which he should be endued. There should be knowledge too, not intuition, but the slow, painful, and uncertain fruit of toil, which should enhance its value while strengthening it by love born of pain. Love, man's highest endowment, not pure but strong from weakness; love enduring, doubting, oppressed, cherished, suffering much and much sustained; blind, oft-failing yet believing; a heart half-enlightened, often-chequered; love whose faculties are hinted at, prevised, and strewn confusedly everywhere about the inferior creatures, all leading up to the superior race—

> "The heir of hopes too fair to turn out false,
> And man appears at last."

And thus God completes the scheme of one stage of being, from which looking backward we see and understand the steps by which the grand result has been achieved, and how

> "Man, once descried, imprints for ever
> His presence on all lifeless things."

Not till the advent of man had the world any meaning as a whole; no creature understood it, for none questioned it. Man appears, and the world begins to live for him; the winds are voices, no senseless gust is the storm now.

The trees commune and whisper their deep thoughts, the water-lily becomes an urn borne by a nymph, the birds have an audience for their concert, the morn has enterprise and the evening quiet. Sunset glory and voluptuous moonlight are displayed for man's regard. The whole phenomena of Nature are displayed for him. Yet says the poet—"Man is not Man as yet"; as prognostics told man's approach, so there arise in him now grand anticipations of something nobler still; here and there a towering mind appears, overlooking its prostrate fellows. All mankind is to be perfected alike, then man's general infancy will begin, and he will start on a long triumphant march; for

> "In completed man begins anew
> A tendency to God."

This noble speech of the dying Paracelsus was published in 1835, Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared in 1859, and his *Descent of Man* in 1871. Darwin taught that man was gradually evolved from the lowest form of animal life. In 1844, a work entitled *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, in which the doctrine of progressive development as a hypothetic history of the animal creation occasioned much controversy; but Browning's poem long antedated these works, and he could hardly have been influenced in his theory by any atmosphere

of animal descent. Lamarck had, however, in 1809 put forth a theory of development which may have influenced Browning in some degree; if this were so, it is another proof of the scientific bent of his mind of which so many hints are found in his poems. It does not seem, however, on a careful examination of the poet's language, that he held any definite theory of development of man from lower forms of animal life. The attributes scattered about the world seeking to be combined in a higher form of life suggested to the Creator "some one creature yet to make," not to develop by an age-long process. In *Cleon* man is God's "last premeditated work," and although it is said "he left the lower and unconscious forms of life," and had "lived at first the animal life," Browning believes a quality arose within his soul which for ever differentiates him from the brute. While it is possible to maintain that Browning held a view of descent and development not very different from Darwin's, it is not possible to prove that he admitted for an instant that the soul is brute-descended. Call it "a distinct creation," "miraculous interposition of the Creator's power," or what we will, Browning held that man alone is a specific brain-being, and agreed with Professor Virchow that "it is quite certain that man does not descend from the ape."

It is, however, no argument against the super-

natural element in man to prove that he has descended, so far as regards his merely animal nature, from lower forms. The chemical analysis of the body of a monkey or of a dog does not differ very materially from that of a man. The air the monkey breathes supports his life, just as it does our own. His bones, muscles, nerves, and blood are built up of the same materials in much the same way as ours, and it no more shakes the argument for a specialized creation of man to prove that he has descended from inferior forms of animal life, than it does to say that because his tissues are formed of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen like those of the beasts, he can be no more than a better sort of brute. Says Dr. Alexander: "As a Christian I have no reason for being prejudiced against the hypothesis that there were creatures preceding man approaching to him remarkably in structure, and probably with some faint rudiments of some of his powers. But the original of Man is not there. It is not in a feeble creature cowering on the banks of some icy river, and feebly protecting himself with arrow-heads of flints from the brutes by whom he was surrounded. . . . Man in the true sense . . . a being of a higher order—for whose creation God took counsel in the depths of His Eternal Being—Man, from whom descends inventors, orators, thinkers, poets, saints . . . those who ransack earth . . . shall never find a bone

of *him* involving a date beyond that which it is possible to assign to the creation of Adam. The antiquity of man does not for us mean the antiquity of the man-ape, but of the man-Adam; not of the man-like monkey, but of the God-like man."[1]

Nor, again, is it a serious objection to the special creation of man to say that man has no attribute which differs in kind from those of the inferior animals, because this is clearly absurd. We admit that, so far as can be ascertained, the mental powers and qualities of the brutes are also manifested in man. A dog loves its master, is faithful, honest, and anxious to please him; it may be admitted even that he worships him in a certain degree. Man recognizes in all these qualities very similar to his own; but the lowest type of man sees clearly enough that he possesses other attributes which are not shared by the brute. Man has abstract ideas of Truth, Beauty, Goodness, etc.; he is capable of reasoning about things which he can neither see nor feel; he is conscious of his personal identity and his place in nature; he can reflect, compare, anticipate, and generalize. If brutes can do any or all of these things, they can do so only in a very imperfect manner. The dog and the ape live for the Now, "Man has For-ever."[2]

[1] *Primary Convictions.*
[2] *A Grammarian's Funeral.*

The man who lives for the present hour only is not living up to his nature; the brute can do no other, he has no future to look to. While the beasts are stationary, man alone progresses, for—

"Man partly is and wholly hopes to be."

CHAPTER IV

CONSCIENCE

BROWNING defines conscience as "the great beacon-light God sets in all,"[1] and declares that

> "The worst man upon earth . . . .
> Be sure, he knows, in his conscience, more
> Of what right is, than arrives at birth
> In the best man's acts that we bow before;
> This last knows better—true, but my fact is,
> 'Tis one thing to know, and another to practise;"[2]

and he argues that "the real God-function" (in other words, the work of the Holy Spirit) is to furnish a motive and injunction for practising what we already know. He finds such injunction and motive in the acceptance of the God in Christ; having taken Him to the heart as Lord of Life who lived and died, and that for the mere love's sake, the man who does so obtains a new truth. This is the effect of the work of the Holy Spirit promised to those who accept the

[1] *Strafford*, Act IV. sc. ii.
[2] *Christmas Eve*.

God-Man. Religion with Browning lies at the root of morality. Agnostic writers admit this, as Professor Huxley himself owns: "I have been seriously perplexed to know by what practical measures the religious feeling, which is the essential basis of conduct, was to be kept up."[1]

Ethical and theological writers have differed greatly in their views and definitions of conscience. John Foster says the moral sense is a bundle of habits, and that among spiritual possessions there is nothing so absurd and chimerical as conscience. Pascal declares that "conscience is one thing north of the Pyrenees, and another south." Shaftesbury characterized the moral sense as a peculiar organ, analogous to taste in art, by which we discriminate between character and actions as good or bad. "Darwin seeks to render probable the view that the moral sense may have been derived through a long succession of inherited experiences from the social instinct, including sympathy. He regards it as in a high degree probable that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense, or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man."[2]

Herbert Spencer says: "I believe that the

[1] *Critiques and Addresses*, p. 51.

[2] *The Religious Feeling*, Newman Smyth, p. 37.

experiences of utility organized and consolidated through all past generations of the human race have been producing corresponding modifications, which, by continued transmissions and accumulations, have become in us certain faculties of moral intuition — certain emotions responding to right and wrong conduct, which have no apparent basis in the individual experiences of utility."[1]

Our modern evolutionists do not recognize, therefore, in conscience either "God's Beacon-light," as Browning calls it, or the "Vicegerent of God," "The Oracle of God," as Byron termed it, or "God's aboriginal Vicar," as it has been described; but they regard it as an "hereditary set of the brain," and "the capitalized experience of the tribe."

Can we reconcile Browning's definition of conscience, orthodox as it is, with the scientific ideas of the evolutionists? This does not seem impracticable. Conscience is not a simple, but a highly complex part of our nature. Its decisions are often very apt to be intermingled with our fallible intellect. It has been well remarked that "Conscience is a practical commander, not a theoretical instructor." Though conscience is a beacon-fire, it may not always burn brightly; its light may be obscured by mists and clouds of ignorance; we may not see

[1] Quoted by Darwin, *Descent of Man*, vol. i., p. 97.

the brightness for the smoke. The decisions of conscience are often wrong. Saul was conscientious when he consented to the death of the proto-martyr Stephen, and when he persecuted the followers of Christ. His conscience was not enlightened.

The most orthodox theologians do not claim that conscience is our infallible guide of action. St. Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic writers define conscience as "the judgment or dictate of the practical intellect, which [arguing] from the general principles [of morals] pronounces that something in particular here and now is to be avoided, inasmuch as it is evil, or to be done, inasmuch as it is good." Conscience does not deal with general principles, but with some particular act to be done or not to be done. Conscience does not tell us that lying and theft are sinful; these are for the intellect to decide. Then when it comes to the practical test, it is for conscience to say, "You are bound to avoid this theft and this lie." It acts with authority. "It acts as the judge of all that we do, and as such it accuses or excuses, condemns or approves, punishes or rewards us with a voice of authority, which we may so far disregard, but the legitimacy of which we cannot dispute. It claims to rule our body and soul, heart and mind, all our appetites, affections, and faculties; and the claim is admitted implicitly even by

those who have most interest in denying it."[1] Yet it does not speak for itself; it speaks as the delegate of another—the capitalized experience of the tribe? Not so; it speaks as the Vicegerent of God. Mr. Darwin, as we have said, makes the moral sense identical with the social instincts, and these of purely animal origin. But his argument is extremely illogical. He thinks that any animal would acquire a moral sense or conscience as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man; but in that case the animal would have become possessed of the ideas of good and evil; it would have arrived at some standard of right and wrong; "would," as Dr. Newman Smyth puts it, "acquire a moral sense; and as soon as an animal possessed moral ideas he would acquire moral ideas."[2] It scarcely required the intellect of a Darwin to arrive at such a conclusion as this!

Kant said "an erring conscience is a chimera," and declared that "two things fill my soul with always new and increasing wonder and awe—the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. . . . The first glance at an innumerable multitude of worlds annihilates my importance as an animal creature that must give back the matter of which it was made to the

[1] *Theism*, Professor Flint, pp. 217-18.
[2] *The Religious Feeling*, p. 38.

planet—itself a mere point in the universe—after it has been for a short time, we know not how short, endowed with vital force. The second, on the contrary, exalts my worth as an intelligence infinitely, through my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animal nature, and even of the whole universe of sense, at least so far as the end of my existence is determined by this law, which is not limited within the conditions and bounds of this life, but goes on into infinitude."[1]

No man, says Browning, is past hope—

> "Don't each contrive,
> Despite the evil you abuse, to live?—
> Keeping, each losel, through a maze of lies,
> His own conceit of truth? to which he hies
> By obscure windings, tortuous, if you will,
> But to himself not inaccessible;
> He sees truth, and his lies are for the crowd."[2]

"The main thing to ask for," says Ruskin, "is *sight*, there is *light* enough."

[1] *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft.* Beschluss, Werke, 8, 312.

[2] *Sordello.*

CHAPTER V

THE WORTH OF LIFE

OUR estimate of the worth of life depends upon our belief in God and the immortality of the soul. Postulating the true Theistic conception of God and the existence of the soul after death, our views of the present life will naturally differ *toto cælo* from those who deny the existence of a God who created, sustains, and loves the world, and hold that death ends all. Such an individual must almost necessarily be a pessimist, or one who believes that life is illusion, without meaning, and irremediably bad. "Of all possible worlds," said such an one,[1] "that which exists is the worst. Its only excuse is that it tends of itself to destruction. The hope of the philosopher is that reasonable beings will shorten their agony and hasten the return of everything to nothing." The horrible doctrine that the world is the product of blind will naturally tends to kill all hope, consolation, and faith. Then follows melancholy, despair, and suicide.

[1] Bahnsen, quoted in *Amiel's Journal*, 1892, p. 191.

Of course, not all pessimists proceed to such extremes, but such doctrines are all in the Atheistic germ. No Theist, certainly no Christian Theist, can logically be a pessimist. Amiel lamented that it seemed to him that everything was left to his own responsibility, and declared "it is this thought which disgusts me with the government of my own life. To win true peace, a man needs to feel himself directed, pardoned, and sustained by a supreme power, to feel himself in the right road, at the point where God would have him be,—in order with God and the universe. This faith gives strength and calm. I have not got it. All that is, seems to me arbitrary and fortuitous."[1]

Kant's estimate of the worth of life was that it is "a perpetual contest with sheer hardships," and "a trial time wherein most succumb, and in which even the best does not rejoice in his life." Fichte says that men "pine and fret their life through; in every situation in which they find themselves, thinking if it were only different how much better their lot would be, and yet, after it has changed, finding themselves no better off than before."

Schelling says—"The veil of sadness is spread over all Nature, the deep indestructible melancholy of all life." "Certainly it is a painful way the Being which lives in Nature traverses in

[1] *Amiel's Journal*, p. 128.

his passage through it; that the line of sorrow, traced on the countenance of all Nature, on the face of the animal world, testifies. . . . But this misfortune of existence is hereby annulled that it is accepted and felt as non-existence, in that man seeks to bear up in the greatest possible freedom from it. . . . Who will trouble himself about the common and ordinary mischances of a transitory life, that has apprehended the pain of universal existence and the great fate of the whole?" "Anguish is the fundamental feeling of every living creature." "The unrest of unceasing willing and desiring, by which every creature is goaded, is in itself unblessedness."

Schopenhauer says—"We feel the wish as we feel hunger and thirst; as soon, however, as it is fulfilled, it is with it as with the enjoyed morsel, that ceases to be for our feeling at the moment that it is swallowed. Pleasures and joys we miss painfully as soon as they cease; but pains, even when they disappear after long presence, are not immediately missed, but their absence has to be brought home to us by means of reflection. In the degree in which enjoyments increase, the receptivity for them diminishes; the accustomed is no longer felt as enjoyment. For that reason, however, the receptivity for suffering increases; *for the omission of the customary is painfully felt.*" "As we do not feel the health of our whole body, but only the little part where the shoe pinches

us, so also we do not think of all our perfectly satisfactory affairs, but of some insignificant trifle that vexes us." "We commonly find joys far below, pains far above our expectation." "Deserving of envy is no one, of commiseration numberless." "Before one declares with such confidence that life is a desirable or thankworthy good, let any one calmly compare the sum of possible delight which a human being may enjoy in his life, with the sum of possible suffering which may afflict him in his life. I believe the balance will not be difficult to strike."

The Hebrew people started from simple optimism—"God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good." The chosen people never looked upon the evils which befell them as sent by cruel gods and evil spirits such as the surrounding nations worshipped; but they recognized that the evils of life were just punishments for transgressions, and the means of purifying the people of God. This was all very well for the nation considered as a whole, but the theory failed when applied to individuals. Job's friends tried to apply the doctrine to his case, but he rejected it.

The author of Ecclesiastes absolutely despairs of the justice of God and of the righteous government of the world, and concludes that "All is vanity and vexation of spirit." In the

Post-Exilian period the Jews developed the idea of Satan contending against God. This theory doubtless originated under the influence of Persian dualism, Ahriman, the Evil principle, eternally warring against Ormuzd, the Good principle. In the last century before the destruction of Jerusalem, Jewish thinkers looked on the world as the kingdom of Satan, and resigned themselves to a pessimistic despair. Christianity began in pessimism; yet the theory was used only as a foil for its doctrine of redemption and salvation through Christ. Our Lord never ignored the power of evil; we find no trace of shallow optimism in His teaching; He declared suffering to be His own lot and that of His followers. He taught that by means of suffering we achieve victory over evil, but ever insisted that the battle must be fought and won *internally* before it can be won for the world. It is a foolish and shallow optimism which ignores the power of evil; but it is a noble, wise, and Christian optimism which recognizes the power of God to overcome evil and dominate the world. In true Christian optimism there is no hardness, no unfeeling casting out of sight the sorrows and the sufferings of others. The Christian optimist sees in all things God's power always at work ameliorating the hard things of life, and using them at the same time as the means of developing and strengthening souls struggling

for the highest and best things. Such an optimist was Robert Browning, and his message to his time while it neither ignores nor depreciates the trials, sorrows, and difficulties of life, bids us take and use them as the only real means of spiritual advancement and development of the God-germs within us. Evil, according to Browning, arises not from any principle limiting the Divine power, not from any defect in God's wisdom or goodness, nor from any universal imperfection of human nature; but he insists that all the pain, sorrow, disappointment and loss we are called upon to bear are factors in our spiritual development which cannot be dispensed with, and if accepted as such will assuredly issue in a recompense unspeakably higher and better than any unruffled life of ease and calm could ever lead to.

Browning does not hesitate to say that God, and God alone, is responsible for all the trials and sufferings of our mortal life, and that not one of them can be dispensed with in view of the end for which we are created.

Pessimism is a mental disorder which has been aptly described by Max Nordau[1] as "one of the philosophic forms of ego-mania," and "the last remains of the superstition of primitive times." The pessimist cares not how fair the world may be if it be not fair for him, his jaundiced vision

[1] *Degeneracy*, p. 497.

spoils his outlook, and because he is unfortunate, sick, or unhappy, he pronounces the world a bad world. Probably no really healthy, robust, prosperous, and busy man is a pessimist, but a self-centred man, who contemplates the world merely as existing to minister to his own requirements, dwells in an atmosphere peculiarly liable to become clouded by gloomy speculations as to the meaning of life. Our livers are responsible for as much false philosophy as bad theology. Not all optimism, on the other hand, is that which should be opposed to pessimism. There is a spirit of self-satisfaction, a luxurious enjoyment of the good things of the world, which, taking no heed of the troubles of our less fortunate brethren, proclaims life to be well worth living, because we, forsooth! have every reason to be content. This is not less a form of egomania than the other.

"The true religious optimism, as Christianity understands it, does not consist in this, that the actual is to be held without further consideration as good, nor that the evil in it is to be ignored; but it consists in this, that the actual world is to be viewed as a teleological process of development, through which the good, the divine world-purpose always realizes itself more and more —a process of development from which, however, evils are so little excluded that they rather serve as necessary and wholesome means for the

good, which can only realize itself through their subdual."[1]

Robert Browning was essentially an optimist. Of splendid physique, a man of robust health, of typically sound mind, happy in his surroundings, with everything to make life enjoyable, it may be said he would have had to go very far out of his way to be other than optimistic. There is not much in such an objection. Health is normal; disease abnormal. Physiology and psychology teach us that nature intends our bodily functions to be performed without friction. When the processes go easily the result is what we call health; health being a feeling of well-being and contentment, we are cheerful and disposed to look on the bright side of things, to make light of difficulties, and be helpful to others. If there be any aim at all in Nature, and only madmen doubt it, such conditions as these are normal, and any departure from them tends to be pathological. A philosophy of life derived from a healthy source is more likely to be right and worthy of acceptance than its opposite. Our healthy Browning is a better teacher, therefore, than a morbid Schopenhauer, Hartmann, or Leopardi.

Browning set himself to solve the great problem of life. A God of love, a God not

[1] Pfleiderer, *Philosophy and Development of Religion*, vol. i., p. 327.

infinitely removed from His world, but an accessible Father to every human soul, could not have created us to be miserable, could not have intended the evil, pain, and sin by which we are surrounded to afflict and mar our existence, without some purpose which should reconcile their existence with His goodness and love towards us. If God could not prevent suffering and misery He would be a limited God, this conception denies Him. Evil, therefore, must have a purpose, otherwise it cannot be reconciled with the theory of an all-wise and omnipotent Creator.

This purpose in evil Browning finds in our moral nature. Everything has a meaning for him. Nothing happens to us without purpose. We are not the sport of vindictive deities who cannot bear to see us enjoy ourselves in our poor ways, nor are the events of our life the result of the turns of the wheel of Fortune. Browning therefore sets himself to question the world, to analyze our souls, and discover what relation they bear to their surroundings. In doing this he does not set his characters upon a stage, and teach his lesson by their external actions. The dramatic incidents in Browning's plays are never sufficient to keep them going; this is why none of them have held their place on the boards for any length of time. His dramas are acted in the souls of his characters.

He takes his *dramatis personæ* almost at random, from the Morgue, the lives of the painters, the obscure accounts of individuals of whom little or nothing is recorded, and then sets himself to dissect and analyze what he finds in them, and so exhibits his results like an anatomist or a chemist. What did life mean to the peasant-girl Pippa? What were the motives, aspirations, and attainments of Paracelsus? What went on in the soul of Sordello? What lay deep down in the nethermost depths of the hearts of the actors in *The Ring and the Book?* All this is analysis, and its whole purpose is to show how the common, ordinary events of life, all our sins, sufferings, and struggles tend to develop our moral nature, and to exhibit good everywhere striving against evil, and success everywhere arising from apparent failure. Picking souls to pieces, Browning finds the gold threads everywhere running through the texture, coarse, foul, loathsome though it be to unobservant eyes. Like the modern chemist who extracts from filth and refuse precious dyes and perfumes, Browning by his alchemy finds the gold-grains in the mire, and the gems in the dust under our feet. "Solution, and not suppression," says Professor Jones, "is what Browning sought." He is compelled by his process to overlook nothing, to call nothing common or unclean, to despise no waif or stray of human nature, but to take

the world as he finds it—all the world, the villains, the unclean, the sordid as well as the noble, the pure, and lofty-minded, and account for the bad and good in all.

Browning holds that

> "This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good."[1]

Our business is to discover what it means for each one of us.

"Life, the greatest of God's gifts," cannot be meaningless. Earth's good proved "incontrovertibly worth loving"[2] to Browning, not because he ignored the evil, but because he understood it as a "cloud across God's orb, no orb itself." He held on, hoped hard "in the subtle thing that's spirit," and so "each purpose ordered right," he learned that life, instead of being "ever just escaped," may be enjoyed as it was intended to be. The Secret of Happiness is to make the Alien turn Nature to the soul; by transmutation to attain peace-in-strife; this the use of life.[3] We shall miss the end of life if we fail to recognize the fact that we are here not to content ourselves, but to please God and do His will.

"White, man's soul is born with;" our business is to keep our souls from pollution, for the

[1] *Fra Lippo Lippi.* [2] *Asolando:* "Reverie."
[3] *Sordello.*

law of life is virtue and not vice, "Life's business being just the terrible choice."[1]

Religion and Science alike teach us that virtue and vice are not mere conventional terms, interchangeable as fashion or fancy dictate, but are eternal truths as God is eternal truth. The philosophy of life is

> "To have to do with nothing but the true,
> The good, the eternal—and these, not alone
> In the main current of the general life."[2]

We are to learn "by the means of Evil that Good is best,"[3] so we must not expect to lead "a ghastly smooth life,"[4] such as those lead who are "left in God's contempt apart"; but loyally desire that

> "Rough-smooth let globe be
> Mixed—Man's existence;"[5]

gratefully accepting

> "Life, the evil with the good,
> Which make up Living, rightly understood,"[6]

we are to learn how to live in weakness as in strength.[7] There is nothing greater than to be man; conceiving, hoping, fearing, craving,

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," l. 1238.
[2] *Ibid.:* "Giuseppe Caponsacchi," ll. 2089-91.
[3] *Old Pictures in Florence.*
[4] *Easter Day.*
[5] *Pisgah Sights.*
[6] *Sordello.*
[7] *Ibid.*

deprecating, loving, and loathing man; bidding God help him till death, touching his eyes, shows him that "God granted most, denying all,"[1] life being devised to evolve, by the machinery of sin, sorrow, and pain, the moral qualities of man.[2]

Life is compared by the poet to a school-time, a probation, a rehearsal, and a battle. As a school-time, we are to recognize that we are placed here to "live and learn, not first learn and then live."[3] There is so much for us to master in our school-days—

> "Man with the narrow mind, must cram inside
> His finite God's infinitude."[4]

Yet God's process is not the least like that of a Board-school, or our preparation for public examinations. The public school and university of our life has for its object "to educe the man," to draw out the latent principles of good from within us, and so by our collisions and attritions with each other teach us how to behave, and not merely to learn lessons from books and the formularies of authority. So by living we actually learn, and this in Browning's view is better than attempting to learn first and then try to live according to rule afterwards. We shall learn

[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "The Family."
[2] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1375-80.
[3] *Parleyings with Christopher Smart.*
[4] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*

more by right, brave, honest *living* than from all the theologies and philosophies ever elaborated in councils or academies. Life, again, is probation; it is designed to try, examine, and prove the stuff we are made of.

"Life is probation, and the earth no goal
But starting-point of man: compel him strive,
Which means, in man, as good as reach the goal."[1]

"Attempt is growth"; the feeblest effort of the will towards good has an infinite reward. "The poorest impulse that for once had play" is a distinct spiritual advance, just as the feeblest struggle of a plant towards the light in a dark cellar ensures its growth. "The initiatory spasm" comes to our souls from God; our part is to deserve it and then to work; this is what theologians call "corresponding with grace."

"The Soul that's stung to strength through weakness, strives for good
Through evil,—earth its race-ground, heaven its goal."[2]

Browning has a lenient eye for our mistakes; even our sins may help us to attain higher things—

"Fine faults of growth, brave sins which saint when shriven."

Temptations have their uses; they show the stuff we are made of. The natives of Australia

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1436-38.
[2] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*

have a saying which may be thus translated—"The good and virtuous man is not enslaved by passion nor polluted by vice; for though he may be immersed in the waters of temptation, yet, like the lotus-leaf, he will rise uninjured by them."

The lotus-leaf is covered by short microscopic papillæ, which entangle the air and cover it with a kind of air-plate, so that actually the water never comes in contact with the surface of the leaf. The process of right living is to develop minute by minute, hour by hour, and day by day, such microscopic—for in the moral world as in the physical the potent is ever the unseen—safeguards against the dangers of our environment, that we shall be always superior to it and never its slave. Without the water the lotus-leaf would have developed no protecting papillæ; without our temptations the noblest and most precious faculties of our souls would have had no existence.

"Why comes temptation, but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestalled in triumph? Pray
'Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!'
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,
That so he may do battle and have praise!"[1]

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1185-92.

In the poem from which these lines are taken Browning has shown us his noblest female character, Pompilia, and one of his noblest male characters, Caponsacchi, whose lives were developed by suffering and temptation from the most trivial and insignificant beginnings. The girl-bride, Pompilia, was as characterless as tens of thousands of untempted, untried maidens of sixteen to be found in any country. Under the pressure of cruel ill-treatment, culminating in her murder by her husband, Count Guido Franceschini, she found the germs in her soul of a splendid heroism, and under the influence of her pure love for the priest Caponsacchi, who attempted to rescue her from her husband's tyrannies, and plots against her purity, she burst from the chrysalis into the glorious winged creature whose soul was rescued from a life of torture and sordid misery to be a fit companion for the angels in heaven. Not only did she develop and deliver her own soul, but, child as she was, she saved the soul and developed the chivalrous manhood of the dilettante priest and idle sonneteer Caponsacchi, who, by his platonic love for, and unselfish, reckless devotion to, the injured girl, "mastered temptation and made it crouch beneath his feet," and so became the soldier-saint, who else would have died a half-believing, half-sceptical son of the Renaissance, idling his life away in

the chambers of luxury and trifling. Both Pompilia and Caponsacchi were tempted to guilty love; by refusing the devil's counterfeit good they found in their souls the precious reward in the sterling possession of a pure, unearthly love, sanctified by the love of God, and each saved the soul of the other.

Life is also compared by the poet to a rehearsal—

> "All's for an hour of essaying
> Who's fit and who's unfit for playing
> His part in the after-construction
> —Heaven's Piece, whereof Earth's the Induction."[1]

At rehearsal things rarely go smooth; some end, we may be sure, the Artist has purposed; at the fall of the curtain it will be explained. Be our part great or small, it is ours to act it well.

> "All service ranks the same with God—
> With God, whose puppets, best and worst,
> Are we; there is no last nor first."[2]

Here we are to learn our "proper play with truth in part," before we are fit to be "entrusted with the whole."[3]

Browning's favourite simile of life is a battle, a constant strife with adversity, and contest with evil and hardships. "The use of soldiership,"

[1] *Pacchiarotto.* [2] *Pippa Passes.*
[3] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*

the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* urged upon Caponsacchi, was to be learned anew—

> "Self-abnegation, freedom from all fear,
> Loyalty to the life's end!
> . . . . . .
> Work—be unhappy, but bear life, my son!"[1]

This brave soldier-priest was the Pope's athlete, God's champion, who

> "Gave such good,
> Great, undisguised leap over post and pale,
> Right into the mid-cirque, free fighting place;"[2]

and for reward — ease, honour, preferment? None of these, but "Work—be unhappy, but bear life, my son!" No other reward? The last words of the dying Pompilia in the convent cell sufficiently rewarded the soldier-saint—

> "Through such souls alone
> God stooping shows sufficient of His light
> For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise."[3]

Robert Browning feared God, but he never feared death. "Fear death?" he asks in *Prospice*,

> "I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
> The best and the last!
> I would hate that death bandage my eyes,
> And bade me creep past.
> No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
> The heroes of old."

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[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1208-12.
[2] *Ibid.*, ll. 1141-43.
[3] *Ibid.:* "Pompilia," ll. 1843-45.

This was written in 1864. A quarter of a century later the poet's last line was published, and on that day he died. That last line is—

"'Strive and thrive!' cry 'Speed,—fight on, fare ever
There as here!'"[1]

"This life is training and a passage; pass,—
Still, we march over some flat obstacle
We made give way before us; solid truth
In front of it, what motion for the world?
The moral sense grows but by exercise."[2]

Thus man is "initiated in Godship," and is

"Set to make
A fairer moral world than this he finds."

It is not for nothing that it has been said—

"I have said ye are Gods."[3]

This is one of the grandest utterances of the poet, one of the most pregnant thoughts ever uttered on the dignity and destiny of man. God not only gives man dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, the cattle, the earth, and every creeping thing thereon. He not only elevates him to become a son of God, but He initiates him into Godship; makes him a fellow-worker with Himself, and sets him the sublime task to make of this imperfect moral world a fairer, more

[1] Epilogue to *Asolando*.
[2] *The Ring and the Book*: "The Pope," ll. 1410-15.
[3] *Ibid.*, l. 1384.

beautiful, and more perfect world than that in which God originally placed him. Expelled from a Paradise which most of us would to-day consider rather a dull and sleepy sort of place, man treads his weary way over barren and cruel deserts till he creates for himself by God's command an infinitely nobler and more beautiful Eden than he lost. Here is a Paradise Regained indeed! No angel needs any longer to warn us back from Adam's Garden with sword of flame, the exile in the wilderness without and the pristine "curse" of labour have enabled man to create out of his blood and tears and sweat something better than a garden of sleep—a moral paradise, the most precious fruits of which he is no longer forbidden to pluck and eat, for they are his own. On no other lines can the aged Pope bear to contemplate the dread machinery of sin and sorrow which looms so dark and gloomy over the world. Recognizing that pain is devised to evolve man's moral qualities, to make him love and win love in turn, to make him create and sacrifice alternately what he counts dearest, the Supreme Pontiff can solve the problem of human sin and sorrow as it can be solved by no other than the Christian.

The answer to those who declare that "Christianity is a failure" because it has not purged the world of war and society of its

thousand crimes against humanity is the indisputable fact that there is "amelioration, a mainly onward moving," no actual retrogression. Our moral sense is growing, and growing by the exercise to which the Gospel has stimulated us. There is evil enough in the world, God knows, but there are tens of thousands, a daily increasing host of noble men and women who would give and actually are giving their lives to purify it. To say that we are no better than the men of pagan Greece and Rome is to insult the intelligence of those who know the elements of European history; but even were the statement true, the obvious reply would be that the men of the pagan world were satisfied with its moral condition, or at least made no serious efforts to better it; whereas from the earliest days of Christianity to the present moment there has not been a day wherein earnest followers of Christ have not passionately striven with greater or less success to make a fairer moral world than they found. The success of Christianity can be estimated by the growing demand that it shall redress the wrongs and oppression under which humanity groans. That wrongs, oppression, and evils are recognized as such is largely due to the diffusion of Christian teaching; they would have hardly been so recognized had not Christ taught us the lesson. Amelioration there is; progress there is; never complete

retrogression. Looked at aright we have plenty of encouragement.

Browning, looking out over a world in which there is so much of sin and suffering, sees that the victory of Good over Evil is slowly but certainly asserting itself—

"Time means amelioration, tardily enough displayed,
Yet a mainly onward moving, never wholly retrograde.
. . . . . .
Dragons were, and serpents are, and blindworms will be: ne'er emerged
Any new-created Python for man's plague since earth was purged."[1]

Browning seems often to be borne down by a sense of "the terrible choice" which is "life's business."[2] Again and again he lets us see the value he attaches to a prompt decision for the right and loyal, the "Now" is of infinite importance to him; the moment's worth incalculable. "We are not babes, but know the minute's worth."[3]

With him each instant is the "moment, one and infinite,"[4] all the world and all we "know in it tends to some moment's product." He recognizes how "that moment's feat" may be fraught with treasures of eternal joy for us; a completed life in place of a patchy and scrappy

[1] *La Saisiaz.*
[2] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," l. 1238.
[3] *Ibid.*, l. 1427.
[4] *By the Fireside.*

unfulfilled one, may have hung on that moment's decision; we might have grasped its infinite meaning and lived a large and full life—

> "This could but have happened once
> And we missed it, lost it for ever."[1]

In the exquisitely beautiful and suggestive poem *Cristina* the value of "the moment eternal," the infinite *Now*, is shown as effecting the mingling of two souls, so that the man gains the woman's soul for the perfection of his own, while she, permitting the next moment to trample out the light for ever, loses his by exchanging it for the world's honour. In the suggestive poem *Now*[2] the lover concentrates "time future, time past," into the tick of "life-time's one moment," and so makes "perfect the present."

But our lives for the most part are at best a dismal record of failure and disappointment, we are negligent as scholars, put to the test we do not answer it, we play our parts badly, and in the fight we are often cowards and are overcome. How is the worth of life made manifest in the many who fail, who cannot say they have fought a good fight, ran the race set before them, or won the prize for which they contended? Browning's whole heart goes out towards the failures. Have we tried at all? Then, he tells us—

[1] *Youth and Art.* [2] *Asolando.*

"I am ware it is the seed of act,
God holds appraising in His hollow palm,
Not act grown great thence on the world below,
Leafage and branchage, vulgar eyes admire."[1]

No failure discourages Browning; if the aim be right, the effort properly directed, he cares nothing about success.

"Better have failed in the high aim, as I,
Than vulgarly in the low aim succeed."[2]

"'Tis not what man Does which exalts him, but
What man Would do!"[3]

"That low man seeks a little thing to do,
Sees it and does it:
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
Dies ere he knows it."[4]

"Not on the vulgar mass
Called 'work' must sentence pass,
Things done, that took the eye and had the price."[5]

But all our "instincts immature," all our "purposes unsure," our thoughts that could not be "packed into a narrow act," "all we have failed to be, all that men ignored in us, this we are worth to God."

Andrea del Sarto muses and complains—

"In this world, who can do a thing, will not;
And who would do it, cannot, I perceive."

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[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 272-75.
[2] *The Inn Album.*
[3] *Saul.* [4] *A Grammarian's Funeral.*
[5] *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

Yet he sustains himself with the reflection that

> "The will's somewhat—somewhat, too, the power—
> And then we half-men struggle: at the end,
> God, I conclude, compensates, punishes."[1]

With all our striving—

> "The Best
> Somehow eludes us ever, still might be,
> And is not."[2]

> "What hand and brain went ever paired?
> What heart alike conceived and dared?
> What act proved all its thought had been?
> What will but felt the fleshly screen?"[3]

Certain he is that "there shall never be one lost good." "All we have lived or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist."[4] We may have aimed too high, may have been too heroic, and found it too hard for us; never mind, says Browning, it is all music sent up to God. "The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky" has all been heard by Him; "we shall hear it by and by."[5]

All our failures here are but "a triumph's evidence for the fulness of the days."[6] Our weariness and agony are but the pauses and the discords of the harmony to come.

Going into the Paris Morgue, the poet sees the bodies of three suicides laid out upon the

[1] *Andrea del Sarto.* [2] *Sordello.*
[3] *The Last Ride Together.*
[4] *Abt Vogler.* [5] *Ibid.* [6] *Ibid.*

slabs of slate behind the glass screen we know so well. He speculates on the causes of their self-destruction. A boy this—did he want to be Buonaparte? An old man that—a red Socialist was he? The third man—did women and gambling destroy him? And as he muses, the poet, never for a moment losing his faith in the supremacy and ultimate victory of Good over Evil, exclaims—

> "My own hope is, a sun will pierce
> The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
> That, after Last, returns the First,
> Though a wide compass round be fetched;
> That what began best, can't end worst,
> Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst."[1]

Browning argues that the incompleteness of man, his imperfection taken in view of his ideals, his possibilities and his aspirations, make for the reasonableness of our hope of a future state of existence and for the immortality of the soul. Everything else in Nature is perfect and complete. Man is the summit and crown of Nature, yet he is imperfect. The star-fish, whole in body and soul, outstrips man, defective in either, yet

> "What's whole, can increase no more,
> Is dwarfed and dies, since here's its sphere!"[2]

Life would indeed be a failure were this life all,

[1] *Apparent Failure.* [2] *Dis Aliter Visum.*

and so "there needs another life to come"; otherwise, as Paracelsus says, "'tis a poor cheat and stupid bungle." In *Fifine at the Fair* (§ 55) the poet says he cannot see what purpose the striving soul serves, or the life it tries conclusions with, unless the fruit of its victories "stay one and all, stored up and guaranteed its own for ever." There must be, he thinks, some mode whereby the gain of every life shall be determined and dowered to the soul eternally. All worth in the world lies in the seeing soul. There is nought of value in life "save for soul that sees." The soul has power to burn and evoke the beautiful from the "stuff for transmuting," which is null and void till man's breath evokes the element of flame from gum and spice, or straw and rottenness; and so the poet gathers heart through these soul-conquests, through this evocation of beauty from the rough and ungainly, the "partial accomplishment at best," the detestable failure at worst, that the slips and faults and the stark deformity will be amended, and the soul at last restored to its fresh morning-prime.

Browning admits that we are very ignorant, very weak, very liable to err, but withal we have one precious heritage—we are created to love goodness and aim at righteousness.

> "Of power does Man possess no particle;
> Of knowledge—just so much as shows that still

> It ends in ignorance on every side:
> But righteousness—ah, Man is deified
> Thereby, for compensation!"[1]

Baffled in his power by each phenomenon, even in the minimized minuteness his fancy may conceive, his knowledge is still further in default by the fact that he does not know what minuteness means. Is it "the millionth thing" which glorifies the wing of an insect, or the vault of heaven speckled with suns? In the estimation of the Infinite the star-dust may be of no greater importance than the wing-dust of an insect.

Man can make nothing he sees in Nature small or great, neither can he understand one whit of what he sees, so weak and ignorant is he. Yet righteousness, moral sense, began in him; he sees faults to mend, omissions to supply, a wide disease of things that are which he longs to ease had he but power and knowledge—in this consists man's pre-eminency. Crown him therefore for this. Wrapped round with ignorance as the weakling is, he *would* cure the wide world's ailing if he *could*. This it is which makes Browning say—

> "In completed man begins anew
> A tendency to God."[2]

There is thus no finality, either in the creed

[1] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.*
[2] *Paracelsus.*

of Christendom, or in the Christian Ethic. "It is important to contrast this," says an ethical writer, "with the finished perfection which was the aim of Greek art, Greek philosophy, and Greek life generally—the clear-cut completeness which was never wholly realized. There is in Christendom, on the contrary, *an acknowledged incompleteness*, which comes from a wider survey and a deeper study of the facts of human life; but which nevertheless outsoars all actual attainment, and is unaffected alike by success and by disaster—never unduly elated by the one, nor unduly depressed by the other. This feature is stamped ineffaceably on all the higher Christian art. In Robert Browning's *Old Pictures in Florence* we find it very significantly unfolded; as in many of his other poems, of which *Apparent Failure* and *Abt Vogler* may serve as examples. The former poem, *Old Pictures in Florence*, may be described as an exposition in verse of the following thesis, viz. that the essence of Greek art lay in its effort to reach, and its success in reaching, a finished although a limited perfection; while the specialty, and even the secret, of Christian art has lain in its profound sense of imperfection, which has nevertheless striven to reach, and to a certain extent has succeeded in reaching, something beyond itself. In one sense the ideal of both was perfection; but the specialty of the Christian, in contrast with the Greek, ideal

is this, that the former permits of no repose within the limits of the finite, and of no contentedness with an earthly boundary. Through all its partial embodiments there runs an aspiration after excellence unattained; in other words, an everlasting ascent, through failure, toward perfection."[1]

Evil thus becomes a stimulus to effort, and the sense of imperfection which exists only in man is due to that divine ray of light shining into his soul which comes from the All-Perfect. One of the greatest miracles wrought by Christianity was the conversion of the Greek mind to the doctrine of the fall of man. The creators of the Venus, the Apollo, and the Antinous must have been hard to convince that man was imperfect, fallen from his high estate, and needing the sacrifice of the Son of God to restore him. The imperfect had no attraction for the Greek mind; the wonder is all the greater that Paul ever succeeded in bringing it to the foot of the Cross and convincing it of its need of Redemption.

"The sacred happiness of a heart which knows it is known of God, is not derived from approving its own attainments, but from the very actings of its insatiable desires, and from its sympathy with the Source of Life and Joy. Its outcry is

[1] *The Christian's Ethic*, by William Knight, LL.D., pp. 118-20.

after Perfection. It longs after God's own holiness; for this it would give earth and heaven. It no sooner effects one conquest than it aspires after another. And the consciousness of this infinite longing to be more and more like to the Only Perfect One, seems to be the essence of a good Conscience."[1]

Man has no finite standard of goodness, his ideal ever rises as he seems about to reach it, and so he "never is but always to be blest." Thus Browning says—

> "The Past indeed
> Is past, gives way before Life's best and last,
> The all-including Future! What were life
> Did soul stand still therein, forego her strife
> Through the ambiguous Present to the goal
> Of some all-reconciling Future? Soul,
> Nothing has been which shall not bettered be
> Hereafter."[2]

There is no asceticism in Browning's philosophy. The flesh is pleasant, and we are not to say we gain ground in spite of it, rather let us recognize that

> "All good things
> Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!"[3]

Though we might be brutes would we sink in the scale, the aged philosopher who has recognized

[1] F. W. Newman, *The Soul*, p. 94.
[2] *Parleyings with Gerard de Lairesse.*
[3] *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

that man's test is so to use the body that it may project the soul on its lone way, glories in the fact that he is for ever "removed from the developed brute—a God, though in the germ."[1] *Fra Lippo Lippi* is a protest against asceticism. The painter-monk declares he has learned "the value and significance of flesh," for God made it all; and he counts it "a crime to let a truth slip." Plato said the philosopher dishonours the body, despises it, and is entirely concerned with the soul; for the body introduces a turmoil and confusion and fear into the course of speculation;[2] and Christian ascetics have gone beyond the ancient philosophers, and have taught that mortification and maceration of the flesh is the only way to save the soul. Body is soul's servant—

> "Soul, once served,
> Has nought to do with body's service more"[3]

say they. Browning notes these old unscientific ways, and no more approves them than he does the new *Religio Medici*, which declares "body and soul are one thing with two names."[4] The soul while it tarries here "'twixt ignorance and ignorance enisled," knowing nothing of its origin or its destiny, keeps just "one foot firm on fact" before it ventures on another step,

[1] *Rabbi Ben Ezra.* [2] *Phædo*, 67.
[3] *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.* [4] *Ibid.*

"getting itself aware," through the body, we are meant to become adept in body ere we shift our station.[1]

Such a philosophy of life as Browning's is eminently calculated to make us happy. To live for a definite purpose, recognizing that all our efforts—whether successful or not, as the world estimates success—make for our development and win the prize of the process, is calculated to dispel melancholy, to exorcise the demon of pessimism, and encourage hopefulness and cheerfulness, without which work must be irksome and duty a galling chain of slavery. How did his philosophy work out in the poet's own life? He says—

> "Have you found your life distasteful?
> My life did, and does, smack sweet.
> . . . . . .
> I find earth not grey but rosy,
> Heaven not grim, but fair of hue.
> Do I stoop? I pluck a posy.
> Do I stand and stare? All's blue."[2]

"Happiness," says St. Augustine, "is Joy in Truth." A true conception of the value of life tends to happiness; philosophy without faith may afford peace and resignation; but the Christian religion, inasmuch as it transcends

[1] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.*
[2] *At the Mermaid.*

philosophy, affords joy and peace; in other words, it gives the believer happiness by enlarging his mental conception to embrace greater and nobler truths. The humblest Christian is a greater philosopher than Plato, because the greater includes the lesser. When Browning says the acknowledgment of God in Christ solves all the problems of the soul, he points the way to the attainment of the highest wisdom. Christianity does not demand the abnegation of the reason, the suicide of the intellect; but, in so far as reason is employed in its acceptance, actually "advances us to be wise." Blind faith is better than unbelief, but a reasonable faith is better than all. Life would be a poor affair if man were "but formed to feed on joy,"[1] and so, as troubles and difficulties are scattered in our path that we may gain strength by surmounting them, doubts are to be prized as aids to faith. Our very joys are three-parts pain; our faith, unless we are mere clods, will often be troubled by sparks of doubt; and Browning tells us that we are to rejoice that such "a spark disturbs our clod,"[2] because it makes us hold nearer of God. Yet withal "we are made for happiness."[3] God's smile can change the world's aspect for us, make our "work grow play, and adversity a winning

[1] *Rabbi Ben Ezra.* [2] *Ibid.*
[3] *In a Balcony.*

fight."[1] Browning's philosophy of life is summed up in the lines—

> "All is best believe,
> And we best as no other than we are."[2]

All is change, nothing lasts; we rise and fall with the tune of the old woe of the world; we live and die, are hurled from change to change unceasingly, our soul's wings never furled, and Browning tells us to rejoice that it is thus with us—

> "There's life's pact,
> Perhaps probation—do *I* know?
> God does: endure His act!"[3]

"We must not suppose ourselves always to have conquered a temptation when we have fled from it," says Thomas à Kempis, and "many men involve themselves deeper in temptations by being too solicitous to decline them." The force of the resisted temptation is transferred to our own souls; the greater is the false good which we reject, the greater is the gain in our moral nature which accrues to us by the very act of rejecting it. The force exerted in repelling is so much gain to our moral fibre. "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation," says St. James; and the blessedness is not only in the future "crown of life" promised to such a one, but the gain accrues at the moment of endurance,

[1] *In a Balcony.* [2] *Ibid.* [3] *James Lee's Wife.*

in the strength afforded for future assaults which none can avoid.

To put ourselves "out of the world" by running away from its dangers and difficulties may be one way of "saving our souls," but it must often be the means of so starving those souls that they become hardly worth the saving. A half-developed human being could perhaps be kept alive for a few months if wrapped in cotton-wool in a suitable temperature in a hatching machine, with good and sufficient food and air, but the resulting product could scarcely be called man or woman. Few of us would care to have as companions those who had been so carefully kept from the struggles, sorrows, and temptations we have had to endure, that they know no more about the stern realities of life than Sakya Muni did when he left his father's palace and first heard of death, disease, and poverty. We are meant to mingle with and re-act on our fellow-men. There are within us a hundred faculties which can only manifest themselves in the great world which lies outside the hermit's cell. Browning does not, of course, mean to suggest that we are to throw ourselves into the way of temptation. "They who fear the adder's sting will not come near her hissing." We are not to invite danger; we should not keep barrels of gunpowder in the chimney corner, and we must avoid temptation as much

as possible, but when it thrusts itself upon us it is to be resisted. We have often seen a cat pursued by a dog; while the cat fled the dog ran after her, but when puss turned and faced him, arched her back, and prepared for combat, the dog trotted off and left her unmolested.

CHAPTER VI

"HIS OWN WORLD FOR EVERY MORTAL"

BROWNING again and again insists that "the world is made for each of us."[1] This is the correlative of the philosopher's axiom: "I think, therefore I am." The one great fact that we know is our own existence. All else may be illusion; this at least, in a world of dreams, is reality. "I think—I exist therefore"; and so the poet tells us—

> "Soul was born and life allotted; ay, the show of things unfurled
> For thy summing-up and judgment,—thine, no other mortal's world!"[2]

Contemplate the cemeteries of the millions of the unknown dead; the crowds in the thoroughfares of a great city; the countless hosts who have lived and turned to impalpable dust, and grasp the thought that for every one of these the world was made—the panorama of life unrolled for each individual as

[1] *By the Fireside.* [2] *La Saisiaz.*

if for him alone it was painted. All may be illusion: there is at least one truth 'mid falsehood, "Myself the sole existence." Browning, in his arguments for the value of life, is always careful to explain—

> "Only for myself I speak,
> Nowise dare to play the spokesman for my brothers."[1]

Life, time, all their chances and changes, are just "probation space—mine for me." His own experience is the only knowledge he possesses: outside that narrow circle "free surmise may sport and welcome." He cannot say whether pains and pleasures affect the rest of mankind as they affect himself. His neighbour is colour-blind, and though to all appearance his eyes are just like Browning's, to whom grass is green, grass to the other man appears red. Who is right? Suppose they were the only tenants of the earth, "with no third for referee," how should he tell what may be the colour of grass? So

> "To each mortal peradventure earth becomes a new machine,
> Pain and pleasure no more tally in our sense than red and green."[2]

This loneliness of man is due to the fact that he is a personal being; as man knows himself to exist because he thinks, so he knows that he possesses a rational free will, and is the subject

[1] *La Saisiaz.* [2] *Ibid.*

of the moral law, and can do right and wrong, and possess what we call character. Such a person does not act from necessity, or he would be a machine, not a man, and, as has been well said, "he cannot be a clock and a man too." A personal being is a supernatural being: his individuality proves this. His mind is not conditioned in space. I can send my thoughts at will wandering over the world; none can control me or bind me down to the ground on which I stand. I am conditioned in consciousness and time, and that consciousness is spontaneous and self-conditioned. Such a personal being is not mere matter: he is called Spirit. "In his personality every man is individual and alone; others can approach the barriers of this solitude and send in intelligence, influence, or sympathy; but no man can scale the barriers into the personality of another to think, or feel, or determine, or act for him; to take his responsibility, or to participate in his consciousness."[1]

Browning has been charged with rank Agnosticism for his determination to speak for no man's thought but his own.

> "Myself I solely recognize.
> They too may recognize themselves, not me,
> For aught I know or care."[2]

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[1] Harris, *The Philosophical Basis of Theism*, p. 414.

[2] *Ferishtah's Fancies*; "A Bean-Stripe."

Is life good or evil? Does white or black triumph? He can speak for himself alone: all external to himself was meant to be suspected. Insect that he is, feeding on a leaf an inch square, he has no power to pass at will into his fellow's world, or enter into his sense of black and white. How can he pass into the life lived by his neighbour, and live that life? And because the world is each man's own world, so he is responsible for the use he makes of all its content. The glory of the sun and sky, the floral robe of mother earth, and the beauty of mountain, plain, and sea are his; the wisdom and the lore of earth's wisest and holiest are at the disposal of his head and heart, and God will one day demand to know how all this has been employed. What is the product of the world for every one? Browning marvels at the great thought—

> "How the world is made for each of us!
> How all we perceive and know in it
> Tends to some moment's product thus,
> When a soul declares itself—to wit,
> By its fruits, the thing it does!"[1]

[1] *By the Fireside.*

CHAPTER VII

THE SOUL AND FUTURE LIFE

WHAT is this principle which differentiates us from the beast? We have never seen it, it escapes our scalpel, eludes our analysis, and cannot be detected by our microscopes. But neither can the life-principle which differentiates the plant from the stone, nor the plant from the animal. We can see and handle matter only, yet we do not doubt the existence of life because we fail to discover what it is. Yet for this reason some scientists, for the most part of the inferior sort, have rejected the idea of the soul in so far as it is considered beyond that of the lower animals. It is no whit harder to believe in soul, though we cannot lay hold of it, than to believe in life, instinct, thought, though nobody has captured either and put it under glass in our museums. "Oh, but evolution accounts for everything," they say. Says Browning—

"Evolutionists!

. . . . . .

'Tis the tip-top of things to which you strain

Your vision, until atoms, protoplasm,
And what and whence and how may be the spasm
Which sets all going, stop you: down perforce
Needs must your observation take its course,
Since there's no moving upwards; link by link
You drop to where the atoms somehow think,
Feel, know themselves to be: the world's begun,
Such as we recognize it." [1]

Ah, but I shall be told, Browning was a poet not a scientist. Very well, then, let us listen to the words of a distinguished biologist. Professor Lionel Beale says [2]—"The tiniest speck of living matter exhibits no structure to account for its actions, and it contains no machinery. It belongs to a system altogether different from the mechanical world. It is not in the least like a clock, for no two of its 'ticks' are alike. Every one of its molecules makes its own wheels and cranks and springs and pendulum, and sets itself going and winds itself up, and makes new clocks, and in a moment, as perfect and as powerful and as strong as the parent, and all this though completely destitute of *works* or *machinery* of any kind. And there are millions of such molecules in the most minute parts of every living organism; many of them acting in harmony, now tending one way, now another; now appearing to obey gravitation, now moving, and with equal velocity, in defiance of the great law."

[1] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.*
[2] *Life Theories and Religious Thought*, p. 39.

And this is all that science has to tell us about life. Does this bring us any nearer to the mystery of life than Browning's "spasm which sets all going" and stops us in our search? He tells us that God stands behind the infinitely little—

> "We find great things are made of little things,
> And little things go lessening, till at last
> Comes God behind them."[1]

The materialist tells us that "molecular machinery," "infinitely complicated chemical properties," "transmutation of physical forces," account for all the processes of life, anything rather than confess with Browning that "the Name comes close behind the simplest of creations."[2]

Man, then, has a soul. We must take this for granted; he is therefore more than matter. He has a free and rational soul; he is therefore more than an animal. He has an immortal soul; and is therefore above the material world which perishes. By soul we mean more than the principle of life, which man possesses in common with lower organic forms. Browning defines the soul as consciousness—

> "Call consciousness the soul . . . .
> Getting itself aware through stuff decreed
> Thereto."[3]

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[1] *Mr. Sludge: The Medium.*
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.*

This stuff we call the body. "Mind is not matter, nor from matter, but above."[1] It converts "human clay to divine gold,"[2] and "works through the shows of sense," "and through the fleeting lives, to die into the fixed."[3] "A spark of soul hides beneath the veriest ash."[4] We have tried to find this spark.

"Physiologists had very good reason for denying the existence, even in man, of an immaterial principle numerically distinct from the living body, and *à fortiori* they had and have very good reason for denying the existence of any such distinct entity in lower organisms. The conception here advocated, however—that of an immaterial principle and a material substance, as much 'one thing' as 'heat' and 'iron' in a red-hot poker are one thing—is open to no such objection. Every form of energy is absolutely and necessarily unimaginable by us save in terms of extended bodies—fluid, gaseous, or what not—or of our own activities as revealed in reflex consciousness; and therefore the individuating, immaterial psyche of each creature must be absolutely unimaginable. But we may be none the less sure of its existence; as we are sure of the existence of heat, though we can never imagine it—except as a quality of some extended body or of our own sensitive faculty. We are quite

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," l. 1353.
[2] *Ibid.* [3] *Fifine at the Fair.* [4] *Ibid.*

sure that there really is such a thing as the objective energy 'heat,' whatever that unimaginable entity may really be."[1]

There is nothing in religion which taxes our faith more than does the atomic theory in chemistry. Yet our scientists cannot dispense with that theory, can find no substitute for it whatever. Without it true chemistry would be impossible, with it we can solve all the problems which it presents. Yet no man hath seen an atom at any time nor ever will. An ultimate atom can neither be seen, touched, heard, nor tasted, yet every man of science believes in the atom. Here, then, the senses have failed us, experience yields to faith. We do not on this account cease to reason about atoms, indeed because they are far beyond the region of sense they are for that very reason more exalted in our science. Theory is more important to us than bare fact. We say they are eternal, unchangeable, and a man may well add with Browning—"The mere atoms despise me."[2]

Descartes imagined a certain distinguishable entity distinct from the life of the body, and inhabiting the brain either in what is termed by anatomists the pineal gland, or some other definite locality, and this he held to be devoted exclusively to thought. No physiologist now believes

[1] *On Truth*, by St. George Mivart M.D. F.R.S., p. 430.
[2] *Saul.*

anything of the sort, and this is all they mean when they tell us that they cannot find the soul by the scalpel or test-tube. But the soul as "the unifying principle," which combines and regulates all the processes of life, which unites physiological, chemical, and mental energies into one harmonious and personal whole, cannot be denied. The existence of the body has been denied by idealists; the soul, the thinking principle, cannot be denied, because "the very act of denying it implicitly affirms its existence."[1]

But, objects the sceptic, if you cannot tell us what the soul is, where it hides, or how we can prove its existence scientifically, at least we must ask you to tell us at what stage of our existence it begins to be? Whence its origin? How is it infused into the organism, and by whom?

We can answer none of these questions, yet we are not abashed, for with Browning we "believe in soul and are very sure of God," though neither our physiology nor our mathematics have aught to do with our belief. Let us hear what one of the greatest German thinkers has to tell us on the matter.

"No necessity of reason constrains us," says Lotze,[2] "to shun the thought of the beginning of the soul. The organic body, in process of being formed, certainly does not educe it from itself;

[1] See Mivart, *On Truth*, p. 390.
[2] *Mikrokosmus*, vol. i., p. 390.

but the living body itself is no incoherent heap of atoms driven to a particular development by a universal law, in an otherwise empty world. As, on the contrary, every physical process, even the most minute, apparently taking place between the elements is likewise an event within the Eternal, on whose constant presence all possibility of action depends, even so the quietly-advancing formation of the organic germ is no isolated independent event, but a development of the Infinite itself. Fostered by it, received by it into its own inner being, this natural event there excites the creative power to new development; and as our human soul receives stimuli from without and answers them by the production of a sensation, so the consistent unity of the Infinite Being lets itself be stimulated by this internal event of physical development to produce out of itself the soul appropriate to the growing organism."

The soul has been well described as "that side of our Nature by which we are in contact with the Infinite." Thus it is that nothing short of the Infinite can ever satisfy the soul of man. "Only soul affords the soul fit pabulum"—

> "Mind seeks to see,
> Touch, understand, by mind inside of me,
> The outside mind."[1]

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[1] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*

God, as the Soul of the World, acts upon our souls immediately, and from within the mind inside us is in immediate relationship to the Divine Mind. "Truth," says Paracelsus—

> "Is within ourselves; it takes no rise
> From outward things. . . .
> There is an inmost centre in us all,
> Where truth abides in fulness."[1]

Soul is beyond Sense. Soul demands to know whence spring outward things—how, when, and why: Sense is content to enjoy them without asking to know at all.[2]

This restless craving for knowledge, says Browning, is just that which differentiates the immortal soul of man from the mind of inferior creatures. *They know* all that is necessary for their perfection, for they are all, from insect up to elephant, perfect in their order—

> "Man's the prerogative—knowledge once gained—
> To ignore,—find new knowledge to press for;"[3]

and so speed onward through ignorance. The imperfection of man here, and his very ignorance about which fools whine, are used by Browning as proofs that "Man partly is and wholly hopes to be"; partly knows, and will approximate to God in knowledge, as "to its asymptote speedeth the curve."

[1] *Paracelsus.*
[2] *Parleyings with Gerard de Lairesse.*
[3] *Parleyings with Fust and his Friends.*

"What height, what depth," he asks, "has escaped God's commandment to Know?" Not a vein of metal in its bed of ore that obeys not the law to know its precise work, not a crystal which forgets the laws it is bound to obey, not a plant is in default how to bud and branch forth. No bird nor beast hesitates to assault or fly, as its safety demands. There is neither worm nor fly but follows the guidance of the light given to it. "All know, none is ignorant." The special portion, scant or ample, of the knowledge necessary for each is walled round, although all is blank one hair's-breadth beyond. Man ignores, thanks to God who made him know, and in the act of knowing discover a limitless vastness of knowledge beyond him to enter, traverse, have, and hold.[1] Man's regal position consists, therefore, in his present imperfection.

"Let the mere star-fish in his vault
Crawl in a wash of weed, indeed,
Rose-jacynth to the finger-tips;
He, whole in body and soul, outstrips
Man, found with either in default.
But what's whole, can increase no more,
Is dwarfed and dies, since here's its sphere."[2]

Man's divine origin, his noble personality, and his immortal destiny may be proved from that passionate desire for truth which always and

[1] *Parleyings with Fust and his Friends.*
[2] *Dis Aliter Visum: Dramatis Personæ.*

everywhere distinguishes him. God's truth like a seal is impressed on our souls. This is why the worst man living

> "Knows, in his conscience, more
> Of what right is, than arrives at birth
> In the best man's acts."[1]

"It is one thing to know and another to practise;" so the good man knows in a better way. As no two faces are alike, no two leaves identical in form, so the impress of God's seal of truth is not identical in every soul. It is the same truth, but expressed differently to each. This is why every man's soul is the single soul in the world to him. "My own, the single soul,"[2] pursues its "lone way"—lone, because no man can so intimately sound the depths and explore the recesses of his companion's soul as to obtain any real intimacy with it.

> "Thou and God exist—
> . . . . . Mankind
> Disparts, disperses, leaves thyself alone!
> Ask thy lone soul what laws are plain to thee,—
> Thee and no other,—stand or fall by them!"[3]

This awful fact is the most solemn of our existence; we have one companion only—God! Another proof of the dignity of our life. It

[1] *Christmas Eve.*
[2] *Asolando:* "Reverie."
[3] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Camel-Driver."

follows, then, that the soul is the most precious thing in the world in God's sight.

Says Guido[1]—

"Christ's maxim is—one soul outweighs the world."

This accounts for "the terrible patience of God." "Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure."[2] What entered into us, all that really influences us, lasts ever, and is past recall. "What once lives never dies."[3] Attaining to a beginning here, it can have no end; it must ever gain and never lose aught.

Browning's "sun sets to rise again,"[4] his daylight does not finish in death—

"I shall behold Thee, face to face,
O God, and in Thy light retrace
How in all I loved here, still wast Thou!"[5]

The soul having learned that love has ever been the sole good of life on earth, shall arise made perfect, because human love is an emanation of the Divine, and must return to its Source. "Love guides the Mortal to the Maker."

But the sceptic will reply: All this is poetry. What has science to do with such dreams and ideas? A French critic on Wordsworth once

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "Guido," l. 359.
[2] *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*
[3] *Parleyings with Gerard de Lairesse.*
[4] *Pacchiarotto:* "At the Mermaid."
[5] *Christmas Eve.*

said, that owing to the special tendency to science and to its all-devouring force, poetry would cease to be read in fifty years. Walt Whitman remarks on this that "the true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science, and to common lives, endowing them with the glows and glories and final illustriousness which belong to every real thing, and to real things only."[1]

I have elsewhere shown that this is the teaching of Professor Tyndall.[2] "The experimental philosopher," he says, in his *Scientific Use of the Imagination*, "is constantly carried beyond the margin of his senses. Imagination with him does not sever itself from the world of fact; [but] his mind must realize the subsensible world and possess a pictorial power." The poet and the man of science, being therefore "two halves of a dissevered world," cannot do without each other, and we have as much warranty for listening to our Browning as we have to our Huxley. Scientists themselves admit this. The greatest of them are as fully alive to the mystery of matter as the poets. The mystery begins where the not-living becomes the living, and scientists do not hesitate to say that it will never be solved. It culminates in man, who is self-conscious, and can speculate on his own origin and destiny.

[1] *My Book and I.*
[2] *Browning as a Scientific Poet.*

Science has never pretended to explain to us how the beef and bread of Stratford-on-Avon became transformed into the *Hamlet* of Shakespeare. Science confesses she must rest content with observing the facts, without making any attempt to explain the transmutation.

"Man's destiny is to occupy the borderland where matter and spirit meet, the lowest in the order of spirits, the highest of corporeal forms, in whom the marriage between spirit and nature is consummated. Man was to be the keystone in the arch of God's creation, binding together the two worlds of spirit and matter in a close and living union. Therefore he was not created for a momentary existence on earth, and then to disappear for ever, or only to survive as an incomplete being. He dies, but he will rise again to be the living link, the harmonizing chord of these two great realms throughout eternity." [1]

Every fresh revelation we obtain from the physical world, so far from helping us to understand the spiritual world and tear the veil from its mysteries, serves but to enlarge the domain of the spiritual world, so that we are led to think at times that perhaps all is spirit; for nothing seems to be real but force, and force in its essence we cannot understand.

"Science has opened up such elevating views of the mystery of material existence, that if

[1] *Natural Religion*, Franz Hettinger, D.D.

poetry had not bestowed herself to handle this theme in her own way, she would have been left behind by her plodding sister. Science knows that matter is not, as we fancied, certain stolid atoms which the forces of nature vibrate through and push and pull about; but that the forces and the atoms are one mysterious, imperishable identity, neither conceivable without the other. She knows, as well as the poet, that destructibility is not one of nature's words; that it is only the relationship of things—tangibility, visibility—that are transitory. She knows that body and soul are one, and proclaims it undauntedly, regardless, and rightly regardless, of inferences. Timid onlookers, aghast, think it means that soul is body—means death for the soul. But the poet knows it means body is soul,—the great whole imperishable; in life and in death continually changing substance, always retaining identity. For if the man of science is happy about the atoms, if he is not baulked or baffled by apparent decay or destruction, but can see far enough into the dimness to know that not only is each atom imperishable, but that its endowments, characteristics, affinities, electric and other attractions and repulsions—however suspended, hid, dormant, masked, when it enters into new combinations—remain unchanged, be it for thousands of years, and, when it is again set free, manifest themselves in the old way—

shall not the poet be happy about the vital whole? Shall the highest force, the vital, that controls and compels into complete subservience for its own purposes the rest, be the only one that is destructible? and the love and thought that endow the whole be less enduring than the gravitating, chemical, electric powers that endow its atoms? But identity is the essence of love and thought. I still I, you still you. Certainly no man need ever again be scared by the 'dark hush' and the little handful of refuse.

"'You are not scattered to the winds. You gather certainly and safely around yourself.'[1]

"'Sure as Life holds all parts together, Death holds all parts together.'[2]

"Science knows that whenever a thing passes from a solid to a subtle air, power is set free to a wider scope of action. The poet knows it too, and is dazzled as he turns his eyes toward 'the superb visitors of death.' He knows that 'the perpetual transfers and promotions' and 'the amplitude of time' are for a man as well as for the earth."[3]

In the *Parleyings with Francis Furini* the poet, acknowledging that man is powerless and ignorant, argues that for compensation "Man is deified by righteousness."

[1] Walt Whitman. [2] *Ibid.*
[3] *In Re Walt Whitman.* (Anne Gilchrist.)

"Where began
Righteousness, moral sense, except in Man?"

Examining our surroundings, we are so surprised and defeated on every side that we cannot even say what is the minute and insignificant and what the glorious and immense; we are equally amazed at the marvels of an insect's wing and the vault of heaven speckled with ten thousand suns. Man makes nothing, understands nothing of all these wonders of creation. Looking round upon the moral world man sees everywhere "faults to mend, omissions to supply." Man, of all created things, is endowed with righteousness, and "would cure the world's wide ailing" if he could. The higher we soar the less we discover of a moral sense like that of Man, and we have no sign of any such thing at all in the creatures from which it is declared he has been evolved. Wrapt round with ignorance, impotent to remedy the defects and wrongs which yet he clearly sees and deplores, Man's moral sense allies him to the Divine, and demands the immortality of his soul. Kant, in dealing with the question of "the Immortality of the Soul as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason,"[1] says that the *summum bonum* in the world can only be attained by perfect conformity of the mind with the moral law. Since this is commanded, its attainment must be possible, yet

[1] *Ethics*, p. 147.

such perfection cannot be realized by any rational being at any moment of his existence. Such perfection, nevertheless, being demanded of him, it can only be found in a progress *in infinitum* towards that perfect accordance of the will with the moral law which we call holiness. The soul, says Browning, cannot stand still nor forego her strife—

> "Through the ambiguous Present to the goal
> Of some all-reconciling Future."[1]

On earth is the root, the ultimate and perfect tree is for hereafter. From an examination of the root, the seed, or the germ, the man of science has no difficulty in mentally constructing the tree or the plant, just as the anatomist from a single vertebra can construct the complete skeleton of a long-extinct animal. The soul's roots are manifestly such that this earth is all too narrow for the complete development of its majestic powers. Says the poet—

> "I know this earth is not my sphere,
> For I cannot so narrow me but that
> I still exceed it."[2]

Not merely in his intellect, not only in his passionate desire "to be all, have, see, know, taste, feel all,"[3] but in the far nobler craving for

[1] *Parleyings with Gerard de Lairesse.*
[2] *Pauline.* [3] *Ibid.*

perfect righteousness, Browning like Kant postulates immortality as resulting from the practically necessary condition of a duration adequate to the complete fulfilment of the moral law.[1]

How many myriads of years of preparation has it not taken to raise mankind to this moral eminence? By the length of the period of gestation we may form some estimate of the dignity of that which is to be born: the insect of an hour and the monarch of the forest are not prepared for on the same scale.

Walt Whitman, who has been called "the Poet of Immortality," says in his magnificent manner—

"Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have helped me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother, generations guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.

For it the nebula cohered to an orb,
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths
And deposited it with care.

[1] Kant's *Ethics*, Pt. II., chap. ii., 6.

All forces have been steadily employed to complete and
delight me.
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul."

And is all this preparation made merely that man may pass his threescore years and ten, and then the grave end all? Walt Whitman is as confident of the future as he is grateful for the past—

"There is no stoppage, and never can be stoppage.

. . . . . .

See ever so far, there is limitless space outside of that,
Count ever so much, there is limitless time around that.

My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,
My Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect
terms,
The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine
will be there."

"There needs another life to come!" cries the dying and disappointed Paracelsus.[1] "If this be all and no other life await us, then life is a poor cheat and stupid bungle and a wretched failure." He glances back across the ages which preceded the advent of man upon the earth—

"Man—the consummation of this scheme
Of being, the completion of this sphere
Of life."[2]

The attributes of man had been scattered here and there over the world before, asking to be

[1] *Paracelsus.* [2] *Ibid.*

combined, "united in some wondrous whole." Throughout creation certain imperfect qualities existing as fragments suggested some one creature yet to make—

"Some point where all those scattered rays should meet
Convergent in the faculties of man."[1]

Such a broad and deep foundation bespoke the nobility of the edifice to be reared: "in completed man begins anew, a tendency to God." This tendency, Browning argues, demands immortality to follow out: "My foot," says Paracelsus, "is on the threshold of boundless life." "Leave Now," said the Grammarian, "for dogs and apes! Man has For-ever."[2]

"'Mid the dark, a gleam
Of yet another morning breaks,
And like the hand which ends a dream,
Death, with the might of his sunbeam,
Touches the flesh and the soul awakes,
Then——"[3]

"That the fact of the soul's immortality is not more obtrusively evident is of enormous advantage to morality and to us men. If, instead of dwelling in what may be termed an intellectual twilight, it was as evident to us as are the faces of our friends, generous devotion and all self-denial would be almost impossible to us, on

[1] *Paracelsus.*
[2] *The Grammarian's Funeral.*
[3] *The Flight of the Duchess.*

account of the certainty we should have about future rewards and punishments. The same consideration applies also to our practical apprehension of God's existence. If His Being and Majesty could not be ignored by us, the most selfish motives would conspire with better ones to prompt us to actions materially virtuous, but sadly deficient in formal goodness. Only by ignorance in these respects can we become worthy to participate in the greatest good. God has been more gracious and merciful to us than to make the evidence of His existence so plain that its non-recognition is a mark of intellectual incapacity. Certain and irrefutable as are the proofs of His Being, yet conviction on the subject is not actually forced upon men as is the conviction of the existence of the sun at noonday. God will not allow Himself to be caught at the bottom of any man's crucible, and He is too benevolent to yield Himself to the experiments of ill-intentioned and irreverent inquirers, who would only draw down additional misery on themselves by a revelation which they were permitted to extort at will, without any regard to their state of preparedness for its reception."[1]

Walt Whitman, as we have seen, no less than Browning, believed in soul, and was very sure of God. Though he made no attempt to define immortality, he had the strongest faith in it—

[1] *On Truth*, St. George Mivart, M.D., F.R.S., pp. 490-91.

"My foot is tenoned and mortised in granite;
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And I know the amplitude of time.
I know not how I came of you, and I know not where I go
With you; but I know I came well, and shall go well."

Browning held the theory of the previous existence of the soul; this imaginative, poetic idea is a very ancient and widely-spread one. The Greek philosophers and the early Fathers of the Church largely held it. No doubt it was originally derived from Indian sources. Says Browning—[1]

"Ages past the soul existed,
Here an age 'tis resting merely,
And hence fleets again for ages.'

In his exquisite poem to his wife, *One Word More*,[2] he refers to this progress in a future series of lives, and pleads that in the present life he attains to verse alone; but

"Other heights in other lives, God willing."

In *Old Pictures in Florence*, again, he tells of the "new work for the soul in another state," where souls repeat in large what they practised here in small, "through life after life in unlimited series," only on a changed scale. Yet he reflects that when the child has reached manhood's estate we burn the rod, and he thinks

[1] *Cristina.* [2] *Men and Women.*

the uses of labour are done with when this life ends, and he for one longs for rest. The chief business of the soul here is to mingle with some other soul—

> "Else it loses what it lived for,
> And eternally must lose it."

There may be better ends and deeper blisses in prospect, but this life's end and this love-bliss have been lost.[1]

Though the woman has lost the man, her soul is his; she has missed her chance of perfection, he has gained his life's object, is perfect—

> "Life will just hold out the proving both our powers, alone and blended;
> And then, come next life quickly! This world's use will have been ended."[2]

It is the nature of the soul to seek durability, it hates to be the slave of change.[3] But out of God all is vicissitude. He alone IS. We change in the very act of saying "I am." Durability can be found only in union with God. That union is possible for us because God dwells in us, and by love we may become assimilated to Him. If mere earthly love is the commingling of souls—and without it there can be no love at all—the love of God unites us in an ineffable manner with the divine, and because "love's first

[1] *Cristina.* [2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.*

demand is that love endure eternally,"[1] the sea and pledge of our immortality consists in our absorption in the love of God in the present life.

That great mystical writer St. John of Cross explains how this is. "In order, then, to understand what this union is, we must remember that in every soul, even that of the greatest sinner in the world, God dwells, and is substantially present. This way of union or presence of God in the order of nature, subsists between Him and all His creatures. By this He preserves them in being, and if He withdraws it, they immediately perish and cease to be. And so when I speak of the union of the soul with God, I do not mean this substantial presence which is in every creature, but that union and transformation of the soul in God by love, which is only then accomplished when there subsists the likeness which love begets. For this reason shall this union be called the union of likeness, as the other is essential or substantial union; this latter one is natural, the other is supernatural, which takes effect when two wills, the will of God and the will of the soul, are conformed together, neither desiring aught repugnant to the other. Thus the soul, when it shall have driven away from itself all that is contrary to the divine will, becomes transformed in God by love. This is to be understood, not only of that which is contrary in act,

[1] *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.*

but also in habit, so that not only voluntary acts of imperfection must be got rid of, but the habit thereof as well. And because no creature can, by any actions or powers of its own, attain to that which is God, the soul must be therefore detached from all created things, from all actions and powers of its own; that is, from its own understanding, liking, and feeling, so that passing by everything which is unlike to, and not in conformity with, God, it may attain to the receiving of His likeness, and resting upon nothing which is not His will, it may be thus transformed in Him. Though it be true, as I have said, that God is always in every soul, bestowing upon it, and preserving to it by His presence, its natural being, yet for all this He does not always communicate the supernatural life. For this is given only by love and grace, to which all souls do not attain; and those who do, do not in the same degree, for some rise to higher degrees of love than others. That soul, therefore, has greater communion with God which is most advanced in love, that is, whose will is most conformable to the will of God. And that soul which has reached perfect conformity and resemblance is perfectly united with and supernaturally transformed in God."[1]

[1] *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. II., chap. v.

CHAPTER VIII

TRUTH

MAN is impelled in his search for Truth by a divine necessity; he can no more cease from the pursuit of Truth than he can cease to respire while he lives. This is one of the proofs of the existence of God, for "Truth is God."[1]

> "There's nothing in nor out o' the world
> Good except truth."[2]

Man, however, is unable to digest pure truth; he may get to bear strong meat some day, but here he must feed on truth with falsehood,[3] must learn his

> "Proper play with truth in part, before
> Entrusted with the whole."[4]

So all the truth we have to do with must perforce be casual truth; mean sparks elicited and dispread at intervals so rarely. The world

[1] *Parleyings with Fust and his Friends.*
[2] *The Ring and the Book*, Bk. I., ll. 698-99.
[3] *Ibid.*, l. 831.
[4] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*

has never been without truth; some few sparks struck out by chance blows, yet never enough of it to let its light stream skyward.[1] So mankind has groped in the darkness of savage rites, of cruel blood-customs, of gloomy superstitions and distorted views of God; yet in all the darkness, gloom, and cruelty ever and again some bright light has flickered for an instant, that instant being as long as man could bear its beautiful gleam. And all the lies that men have believed, all the falsehoods they have fostered and treasured! Those lies were necessary, says Browning, for "every lie is quick with a germ of truth."[2]

If we could but appreciate the truths we possess aright! "One truth leads right to the world's end."[3] So we must "count it crime to let a Truth slip."[4] Though "fire is in the flint" of myriad stones, the fire is seldom liberated.

In the inmost centre of us all truth, as we have seen, exists in fullness. Yet wall upon wall of gross flesh hems it in, and knowledge, says Browning, is rather the letting out the light than letting light enter;[5] how seldom the escape is made! In the lowest, truth, in greater or less degree, is hidden away; each one of us carries the divine spark in his own bosom. "It is a

[1] *Sordello.* [2] *Mr. Sludge: The Medium.*
[3] *Ibid.* [4] *Fra Lippo Lippi.*
[5] *Paracelsus.*

great age this of ours," says Mr. Ruskin, "for traction and extraction, if it only knew what to extract from itself, or where to drag itself to." There is light enough, if we did not do our best to obscure it.

"Truth's golden o'er us although we refuse it."[1]

In every soul, weak, deformed as it may be, Browning sees such love of truth, such appreciation of the Divine standard of right, that it is compelled perforce to go on "striving to combine with what shall right the wrong," bring to the standard what is under or above, "supplement unloveliness by love." And so he calls Art

"The love of loving, rage
Of knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things
For truth's sake, whole and sole."[2]

The love of truth impressed in the artist's breast compels him to reconstruct out of the poor fragment before him the ultimate entire, so he contributes to defect, and toils till he has "restored the prime, the individual type." In painting, then, we have "truth made visible in man."[3]

"Man, poor elf,
Striving to match the finger-mark of Him,
The immeasurably matchless."[4]

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[1] *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha.*
[2] *Fifine at the Fair.* [3] *Pictor Ignotus.*
[4] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.*

That he does strive proves his relationship to the Eternal truth he desires in his feeble way to express. So "in Art the soul uplifts man's best of thanks," for he at least strives to "limn truth not falsehood." He states

> "What truth is from his point of view,
> Mere pin-point though it be." [1]

The soul gets to know itself through the body, "the stuff decreed thereto"; this fleshy frame of ours is empowered by the soul to reveal its moods of love and hate, the painter's work is to seize and give "permanence to truth, else fugitive." The lesson is the same in *Fra Lippo Lippi.* The artist lends out his mind for us to see with. God impresses the truth in the artist's soul, "Art was given for that," and God uses him to express the truth to us. The world "means intensely and means good": the artist's meat and drink is to find what it does mean. In *Andrea del Sarto* the tragedy is that the artist's ideal cannot be realized by him, "faultless painter" though he be. The truth was in his soul right enough, but he has become the slave of lower motives, the noble ideal has partly faded, he cannot seize it, and is condemned to work on a lower level than was his by right—God's beacon-light dimmed by earthly smoke. Truth would

[1] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.*

have lifted him "above the lowness of a lie," but Andrea was not true to himself.

Truth comes to us, again, from the poets—

> "The best
> Impart the gift of seeing to the rest." [1]

They see the truth for themselves, and for us they are "the Makers-See." "All direct truth comes to us from the poet; whether he be of the smaller kind who only see, or the greater, who can tell what they have seen, or the greatest, who can make others see it."

> "All poets, God ever meant
> Should save the world," [2]

tell us what common folk feel [3]—

> "Poets know the drag-net's trick." [4]

From the depths of our souls they can draw mysterious, long-hidden spirit treasures we never knew before were sunk there.

> "What's poetry except a power that makes,
> And speaking to one sense, inspires the rest,
> Pressing them all into its service?" [5]

Musicians, too, have this power over truths—

> "Music! Dredging deeper yet,
> Drag into day,—by sound, thy master-net,—
> . . . . . .
> Truth's very heart of truth!" [6]

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[1] *Sordello.* [2] *Paracelsus.*
[3] *The Last Ride Together.* [4] *Sordello.*
[5] *Balaustion's Adventure.*
[6] *Parleyings with Charles Avison.*

Browning seems to say that proud as are the artist and the poet of their possession of and power of expressing so much truth, the musician is still closer to the Divine—

"God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear;
The rest may reason and welcome; 'tis we musicians know."[1]

The soul has moods and motives which are too poetical for poetry, and music alone has the power to breathe them. The suggestions of the Divine are not always to be narrowed into words or expressed in a syllogism, these mysterious truths are confided to music. When some one asked Mendelssohn what he meant by his *Lieder ohne Worte*, the musician replied that "they meant what they said." This is why we love

"Music (which is earnest of a heaven,
Seeing we know emotions strange by it,
Not else to be revealed)."[2]

So yearned Aprile the poet, who would show his love for man through art, poetry, and music—

"I would supply all chasms with music, breathing
Mysterious motions of the soul, no way
To be defined save in strange melodies."[3]

"Sirs, there is nothing new possible to be revealed to us in the moral world; we know all we shall ever know; and it is for simply reminding us, by their various respective expedients, how

[1] *Abt Vogler.* [2] *Pauline.* [3] *Paracelsus.*

we do know this and the other matter, that men get called prophets, poets, and the like. A philosopher's life is spent in discovering that of the half-dozen truths he knew when a child, such an one is a lie, as the world states it in set terms; and then, after a weary lapse of years, and plenty of hard thinking, it becomes a truth again after all, as he happens to newly consider it and view it in a different relation with the others; and so he re-states it, to the confusion of somebody else, in good time. As for adding to the stock of truths, —impossible! Thus, you see, the expression of them is the grand business—you have got a truth in your head about the right way of governing people, and you took a mode of expressing it which now you confess to be imperfect. But what then? There is truth in falsehood, falsehood in truth. No man ever told one great truth, that I know, without the help of a good dozen of lies at least, generally unconscious ones. And as when a child comes in breathlessly and relates a strange story, you try to conjecture from the very falsities in it what the reality was, —do not conclude that he saw nothing in the sky because he assuredly did not see a flying horse there as he says,—so, through the contradictory expression, do you see, men should look painfully for, and trust to arrive eventually at, what you call the true principle at bottom."[1]

[1] *A Soul's Tragedy*, Act II.

CHAPTER IX

FAITH AND DOUBT

"How very hard it is to be a Christian!"[1] says Browning, and by this he means not the mere living up to the Christian ideal, *that* we all acknowledge to be difficult, but hard to realize what such a faith implies. Belief is difficult enough, but once convince a man that the least command of God is God's indeed, none but an idiot would dispute it. Martyrdom itself would be easy, could we be assured that God would be served that way. It is the uncertainty makes all the difficulty. We are so apt to argue that perhaps there is no God who is interested in our affairs, no laws which He cares whether we keep or break. A Simeon Stylites on his pillar, a St. Anthony in the desert, or a Xavier perishing in the Indies, may please Him no more than the lotus-eater in his luxury. It may be as pleasing to the Supreme Being, if He have any interest in our affairs at all, that we should eat, drink, and be merry as if we sacrificed our-

[1] *Easter Day.*

selves for others, or poured out our blood in the arena as witness to what we conceive to be His truth. Science teaches us how to ensure certain results by such and such processes and expenditure of energy. We reap precisely in proportion to what we have sown. In all this we know what we are about; but when it is demanded of us that we assent to certain propositions about God, the soul, and future life, and endeavour to shape our lives in accordance with that assent, we are invited to invest in a speculation for which no guarantee whatever is offered by any responsible person.

You demand a scientific faith? asks Browning; but "a scientific faith's absurd."[1] Faith may be God's touchstone—

> "You must mix some uncertainty
> With faith, if you would have faith be."[2]

Plato said, "God geometrizes," and men demand that the exact laws of the natural should obtain in the spiritual world; but our moral and religious character does not

> "Grow as a natural tree,
> Stand as a rock, soar up like fire."[3]

"A faith that is commanded," says Kant, "is nonsense." "We cannot prove God, freedom, and immortality by speculative reason, although

[1] *Easter Day.* [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*

neither can we refute them."[1] We may wish for God, freedom, and immortality, but that does not justify us in assuming them. But, he adds, if the pure moral law inexorably binds every man as a command (not as a rule of prudence), the righteous man may say: "I *will* that there be a God, and that my duration be endless."

We cannot safely argue from a want to the objective reality of the object, yet it must be remembered that the wish for God, freedom, and immortality amounts to much more than mere inclination. A right conception of the moral law justifies us in assuming the conditions proper for it. To realize the *summum bonum* to the utmost of our power is our plain duty; the rational man therefore cannot avoid assuming what is necessary for its objective possibility. The assumption is as necessary as the moral law.[2]

Faith is not servitude, as it would be if we were compelled to believe in the doctrines of Christianity; nor are we compelled to believe in the sun's light and the motion of the waves. Faith initiates us into the highest freedom, because, in the words of St. Augustine, "it opens the way for the understanding."

"Belief or unbelief
Bears upon life, determines its whole course."[3]

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[1] Kant's *Ethics*, Pt. II., ch. ii. 7.

[2] See note to Kant's *Ethics*, Pt. II., ch. ii. 7.

[3] *Bishop Blougram's Apology*.

In his first published poem, *Pauline*, Browning avows

> "That he will give all earth's reward
> But to believe, and humbly teach the faith."

How nobly he fulfilled his promise to his life's end the most superficial examination of his works will show. Yet he had just the warm sympathy with the honest doubter that we should expect from a mind of his calibre. He had doubted, had "faced the spectres of the mind," but with such religious earnestness that, as his *Paracelsus* said, his scepticism was but

> "Just so much of doubt
> As bade me plant a surer foot upon
> The sun-road."[1]

Bishop Blougram's faith is not of a very high order; yet the poem shows how lenient the poet could be to the honest half-believer. "If you desire faith—then you've faith enough." Pure faith sears too much our sense to be borne. Creation is intended to hide God, "and that's what all the blessed evil's for." It is to shield us from the potent light till we can bear its stress—just as the brain-pan and the eyelid keep brain and eye from withering. Faith with the half-believing Bishop meant "perpetual unbelief kept quiet." A poor thing that! Well—the Bishop could retort unanswerably—"It is as good as any of

[1] *Paracelsus.*

your scepticism!" The Agnostic, the Atheist, and Indifferent are no safer from the pangs of doubt than the weakly Christian. How does the unbeliever know his unbelief will last?

> "Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,
> A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
> A chorus-ending from Euripides,—
> . . . . . .
> The grand Perhaps!"

A man throws off his early faith, discards his church-going, puts aside his Bible, his religious books, neglects prayer, and scoffs at what he once held precious beyond all else in the world. If he reads, thinks, observes at all, his mind will oscillate as a pendulum from one point to another, and he will be compelled to admit to his own heart at least

> "All we have gained then by our unbelief
> Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
> For one of faith diversified by doubt."[1]

And if our doubt be sincere, and truth, and not self-will and perversity, be our motive power—

> "The more of doubt the stronger faith, I say,
> If faith o'ercomes doubt."[2]

The rejection of Christianity is too often due to a reckless spirit of trifling; a careless tampering with sacred things far enough removed from the only spirit which can excuse the "neglect of

[1] *Bishop Blougram's Apology.* [2] *Ibid.*

the pearl while dredging for whelks and mud-worms."[1] "No inquiry," says Cardinal Newman,[2] "comes to good which is not conducted under a deep sense of responsibility, and of the issues depending upon its determination." It is not enough to bring the intellect to bear on the question of religion, for its mere apprehension by the intellect will be of little service to the soul. Religion must be *lived*, not debated merely; and irreverent, ungrateful minds must be transformed by it before they are competent to discuss it.

Our torment now-a-days is unbelief. True the vast majority of unbelievers are very little concerned about the matter; yet if any one is in doubt concerning those things which involve his most precious interests, and takes no trouble to solve his perplexities, he must surely be the most miserable and unfair of men. "The cause of unbelief is in the will," says St. Thomas, "but unbelief itself is in the intellect."[3] Faith is a treasure of which we are in danger of being robbed. It is a poor thing to be vain of, that our most precious possession is stolen from us. Yet the greater part of those who have lost their faith, or have never possessed it, are so little concerned at their poverty that they treat the

[1] See *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1440-50.
[2] *Grammar of Assent*, p. 241.
[3] *Summa*, II.—II., Qu. x., Art. ii. 2.

matter as no more than a diversion of the intellect, a game at which they can exhibit their critical skill. Unbelief, therefore, is usually a great sin—the greatest of all sins, because it has its roots in rebellion against God, pride and perversity of will. How often do we hear young persons exclaim with Tennyson—

> "There is more faith in honest doubt,
> Believe me, than in half the creeds"?

Yes, if the doubt be really honest, and if the creeds be merely professed with the lips, and do not touch the heart. But how many doubters in matters of religion are honest? It is so clever to discard our mother's faith as an old wife's fable—so smart to know so much more about "worn-out creeds and discredited dogmas" than our father. And so, having taken, by dint of a few years' cramming, a good memory, and considerable perseverance a more or less valuable University degree, the faith which has sufficed for the brightest intellects of the world for nigh two thousand years is cast aside as an old and worthless garment, and naked and not ashamed stands the son of the age of science.

I have no desire to be unkind; my heart goes out towards such poor naked souls, and I long to introduce them to my spiritual clothier. If Robert Browning cannot cover their mental nakedness, I fear they are like the casuals in our

work-houses who tear up the clothes given them by the guardians, out of sheer determination to be different to other people, and go about *in puris naturalibus*. Browning has no desire to dress his young friends in any uniform. He offers the soul-garb of neither Romanist, Anglican, nor Nonconformist; he distributes not the vestments of any of the Churches. All he desires is that no reasonable soul should be without a reasonable garment of faith, and that I make bold to declare he will bestow to any patient and serious student. Do not mistake me, above all do not mistake Browning: doubt, the doubt of the man of science, whose business it is to doubt everything of which he has not satisfied himself of the evidence—such *honest doubt* is not sinful. We may have

> "To break up this the new—
> Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report—
> Whence need to bravely disbelieve report
> Through increased faith i' the thing reports belie."[1]

It may be our most solemn duty

> "To shake
> This torpor of assurance from our creed,
> Re-introduce the doubt discarded;"[2]

but this mission is laid but on few shoulders, and only at long intervals. When such men become sceptics, be sure they are unwilling

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1865-68.
[2] *Ibid.*, ll. 1853-56.

sceptics; they do not boast of their loss of faith, they lament it as a child mourns the loss of father or mother. Reason has antagonized faith, and has seemed to be victorious. They must reconstruct their religious system—

> "Correct the portrait by the living face,
> Man's God, by God's God in the mind of man."[1]

But such work is not for every one. For the great majority of sceptics, willing or unwilling, the doubt of the present day paralyzes the man. There have been those in whom

> "Though faith were fled,
> Unbelief still might work the wires and move
> Man, the machine, to play a faithful part."[2]

But, as has been finely said, "The doubt of to-day destroys the sense of reality; it questions truth; it envelops all things in its puzzle—God, immortality, the value of life, the rewards of virtue, the operations of conscience; it puts a quicksand under every step; it injures the faculties so that they no longer work to any end; it undermines purpose and inspiration, and leaves no path for the feet but aimless desire or native instinct—life a maze, the heavens empty, the solid world the only reality! The lack of moral earnestness, the feeble sense of spiritual things, the material aims and standards of success, the

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1873-74.
[2] *Ibid.:* "Guido," ll. 611-13.

push for wealth as the only real thing, the godlessness of society at large,—these are its signs and fruits."[1]

Are these results of scepticism things to boast of? Are these the signs of a manly, free, robust spirit? This spiritual anæmia, these paralyzed mental muscles, this dwarfed stature of the soul, this consumptive, wasted form—are these the physical signs of a "man for aye removed from the developed brute"?[2]

In the olden time there was but little scepticism; science was not at a man's elbow to disturb his faith. No man had to think for himself, his thinking was all done for him. Now-a-days, a young man without his theories and opinions on God, the Soul, the Future Life, and Faith is looked upon as a poor creature. He questions his parents' creed as soon as he smokes his first cigar, and has no sooner endowed himself with a practicable watch than he looks about for a theory of life.

"Doubt fingers at each crevice,"[3] and in an insane fear of being detected in believing what his elementary text-book of physical science says cannot be proved, he casts his faith overboard. We are justified in questioning, provided only our search be for truth, and our love

[1] Munger, *The Appeal to Life*, p. 34.
[2] *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*
[3] *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.*

for it be so great that we are willing to follow wherever it may lead us.

"He who does not follow the impulses of good which he receives from within and without, but rather gives himself up to the selfish propensities which those impulses are meant to counteract, becomes finally and irrevocably enslaved to them. All things that ought to work by this for his good, serve for his harm; the healing balm becomes for him a poison."[1]

"When there is a great deal of smoke," says Coleridge, "and no clear flame, it argues much moisture in the matter, yet it witnesseth certainly that there is fire there; and therefore dubious questioning is a much better evidence than that senseless deadness which most take for believing. Men that know nothing in sciences have no doubts. He never truly believed who was not made first sensible and convinced of unbelief.

"Never be afraid to doubt, if only you have the disposition to believe, and doubt in order that you may end in believing the Truth. I will venture to add in my own name and from my own conviction the following: He, who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all."[2]

[1] Neander, *Life of Christ*, p. 425 (Bohn's ed.).
[2] *Aids to Reflection*, Aph. lxii.-lxiii.

Faith is very different from mere opinion. The distinction between the two, even when understood, is often neglected. Modern Christianity is so degenerate that the two things are usually confused. "When we assent to a thing, not because we are compelled to do so by the evidence of our senses, but because by an act of the will we incline to one side rather than to another, this is *opinion*, if done with reservation or doubt. If all reservation, doubt, and dread be excluded, it will be *faith*."[1]

"Our devout beliefs," says Dr. Martineau, "are not built, as we suppose, upon the dry strand of reason, but ride upon the flood of our affections. Faith is the natural hypothesis of a pure and good heart, whence it looks on the face of nature and of life, and deciphers and welcomes their diviner lineaments. Want of faith is the hypothesis of a low and unaspiring heart, which feels the presumption to be *against* whatever is high and glorious, and gives the benefit of every doubt to the side of the flat and mean."[2] We are therefore responsible for our faith or want of belief. If we give ourselves to mean and degrading things, we shall have no taste for what is high and noble. If our pursuits and predilections are for the paltry and trivial, we shall paralyze our love for the noble and lofty.

[1] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, Pt. II.—II., Qu. i., Art. 4.
[2] *Hours of Thought*, p. 91.

It is a law of nature that faculties and organs which are not exercised gradually perish. If we indulge the senses and devote ourselves to the animal within us, our spiritual nature will atrophy, and the ideal will dwindle away. Moral and intellectual rickets will inevitably supervene on mental and spiritual starvation. The Pope's indictment against Count Guido was the terrible one—

> "I find this black mark impinge the man,
> That he believes in just the vile of life."[1]

This supremest of villains had low instincts and base pretensions, though he clothed himself in an armour of probity which was "falsehood scale on scale," and acted a lie and a disguise which deceived not only the world but himself. A man may so lose the power of appreciating delicate flavours and odours by accustoming himself to coarse and pungent things, that his organs are useless for the finer work that the highly-trained senses perform. It is so with faith. The bad man thinks no goodness exists anywhere; the degraded woman has no faith in womanly virtue and purity—

> "Faith may be, one agrees,
> A touchstone for God's purposes."[2]

There is abundant goodness, love, self-sacrifice,

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 511-12.
[2] *Easter Day.*

and honesty around us. If we are pure-minded, faithful souls ourselves we shall not be slow to recognize them. Thus does God test us; the fact that we distinguish no goodness in others is due to the deterioration of our own higher nature. The readiness to believe in goodness is the consequence of the cultivation of our own character; and the nature which trusts others, and believes in the better soul deep down in the worst of men, is the character in which we expect to find faith, because it is the soil in which such a flower loves to flourish. Doubt is all very well if it serve the purpose of leading us to faith; but a life of doubt is a miserable, starved, and deranged existence. Says Bishop Blougram—

> "Faith is my waking life:
> One sleeps, indeed, and dreams at intervals,
> We know, but waking 's the main point with us,
> And my provision 's for life's waking part."[1]

[1] *Bishop Blougram's Apology.*

CHAPTER X

LOVE

BROWNING'S gospel is essentially one of love. In *A Death in the Desert* the poet is seen at his best, when in the character of the Beloved Apostle he sets forth the love of God manifested to the world in the person of Jesus Christ. "Such ever was love's way: to rise, it stoops." He tells how God's love is at issue still with sin in the world which His power first made. Love, wrong, and pain he sees all around, and sees the need yet transiency of sin and death, and the good and glory consummated thence. He sees the Love once weak uprise and resume the Power which had been laid aside, and exclaims that

> "Life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
> And hope and fear . . . .
> Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love."[1]

"There is no good of life but love."[2] If there

[1] *A Death in the Desert.* [2] *In a Balcony.*

be anything else which has the semblance of good, it is only some glory radiated from love which gilds and gives it all its worth. In the *Flight of the Duchess* the poet shows us "how love is the only good in the world." A good so precious that, once discovered, a human soul will sell all that it has to purchase the pearl it cannot live without; for man "must live beloved or die."[1] In the romantic story of the *Flight of the Duchess* we see a young girl wedded to a rich nobleman; surrounded by all that wealth can furnish, but starved for want of one ray of human love. In an aged gipsy woman who meets her at her castle during her husband's absence she finds the love she has never known before, and forsakes all to follow her. It is the old story with a variation, but sex is not everything in love. In the noble religious poem *Saul* the poet argues from the existence and potency of human love to the Divine, and thence to the Christ, as the most perfect manifestation of the love of God.

"Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
That I doubt His own love can compete with it?
. . . . the creature surpass the Creator?"[2]

Human love is God's own gift to man. "He creates the love to reward the love,"[3] and "Love

[1] *James Lee's Wife.*
[2] *Saul.* [3] *Evelyn Hope.*

gains Him at first leap."[1] The poet sees a lovers' meeting amid the ruins of the Roman Campagna. Reflecting on the glories of the past represented by "the mountains topped with temples," the colonnades, the causeways, bridges, and the aqueducts of the plain, the million fighters who went forth thence in one year, the centuries of folly, noise, and sin, and then considering the peasant girl and youth before him, and dismissing the past ages "with their triumphs and their glories and the rest," he declares that "Love is best."[2] The burden of the poet's song is that "Love is all and Death is naught."[3]

Love is the mingling of souls. Existing in long-past ages, the soul rests here awhile,

> "And hence fleets again for ages,
> While the true end, sole and single,
> It stops here for is, this love-way,
> With some other soul to mingle."[4]

To miss this love-way is to lose what it lived for, and the loss is an eternal one. There may be other lives in store for us, but no other to take the place of this life. Better ends and "deeper blisses" may await us, but miss our chance of learning love here, and we shall be by so much in defect hereafter. Love reveals

[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Pillar at Sebzevah."
[2] *Love among the Ruins.*
[3] Epilogue to *Fifine at the Fair.* [4] *Cristina.*

and completes the self, and in the completed self

> "Man begins anew a tendency to God."[1]

Contemplating human love and all it would do if it might, the poet finds in his own heart an argument for the existence of a loving Creator. It is impossible to imagine the creature surpassing the Creator—

> "The loving worm within its clod
> Were diviner than a loveless god
> Amid his worlds."[2]

The meeting-place between God and man is love. Not by his intellect can man build a tower to reach God; foredoomed to failure and utter confusion are all attempts by searching to find out God; but every step love takes lifts us nearer heaven, and brings God down to man. Love, then, is the sole good of life,[3] and its first demand is that it shall endure eternally.[4] Love which is not eternal is but an emotion masquerading in love's dress. "Love me for ever!" is the demand of *Earth's Immortalities*.[5] Love is the only treasure which is inexhaustible; disburse it wide as we please, its sum remains what it

[1] *Paracelsus.*
[2] *Christmas Eve.* [3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.*
[5] *Dramatic Lyrics.*

was before; for in giving us love God has given us Himself, and causes it to pass into our souls to

> "Add worth to worth,
> As wine enriches blood, and straightway send it forth,
> Conquering and to conquer, through all eternity,
> That's battle without end." [1]

Browning's treatment of the principle of love, like everything else in his philosophy, was consistent from first to last. There is development, but no radical change. In *Pauline* he utters his grand Credo—"I believe in God and truth and love." The first notes were intoned in 1832, and in 1889 he died with a love-chant on his lips, the day he gave us *Asolando*—

> "Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you loved so." [2]

The theme of *Paracelsus* is the failure of knowledge alone to develop or satisfy the soul. Knowledge not strengthened by love obstructs the divine purpose, inasmuch as

> "Love—strong from weakness,
> . . . . . .
> Love which endures and doubts and is oppressed
> And cherished, suffering much and much sustained,
> And blind, oft failing, yet believing love,
> A half-enlightened, often-chequered trust," [3]

is a faculty previsions and forecasts of which are

[1] *Fifine at the Fair.*
[2] Epilogue to *Asolando.*
[3] *Paracelsus.*

seen scattered confusedly amongst the inferior natures, and which point to a superior race—

> "The heir of hopes too fair to turn out false,
> And man appears at last." [1]

It took Paracelsus, with his lifelong passion for knowledge, years of disappointed labour and brain-distracting toil to discover that he had aimed at the possession of only half the truth of the God-illumined soul. Love and knowledge make the divine in man; divorced, they are "two halves of a dissevered world." The lesson of *Sordello* is not wholly different. Soul and body have each alike need of the other: soul must content itself without the Infinite till the earth-stage is over. Sordello, like Paracelsus, learned how to live as he came to die; he made the great renunciation, and in seeming defeat achieved his soul's success.

> "The cloud of hindrance broke
> But by the failing of the fleshly yoke." [2]

Nature did her best to teach Sordello the love that takes the single course indicated by the simplest lore, but Nature failed. At death "he found motive for human love in the Divine impulse sufficient for the humble service to his unworthy fellows in the worthiness of the Master

[1] *Paracelsus.* [2] *Sordello.*

whose service it is. Life's secret is found at last, but too late for this life's work."[1]

Love, Browning teaches, is not to be realized here; as it is eternal, a ray of the Divine nature, it cannot exhaust itself in time. In *Cristina*, as we have seen, we are here to learn love by mingling soul with soul. In *Evelyn Hope* the lover protests that he will claim his dead bride though he pass through more lives yet, and traverse worlds not a few. In the *Last Ride Together* the lover imagines they may "ride on, we two, for ever, changed not in kind but in degree." In all these poems the lesson is that love is not to be realized here. In the development of the soul love is the chief factor. The pure, platonic love of Caponsacchi and Pompilia in *The Ring and the Book* changes the fribble, coxcomb sonneteer into the "soldier-saint," and makes of a timid girl-bride, wedded by fraud to a villain, a noble, brave, and lofty-minded woman.

"Browning," says Professor Henry Jones, "in one thing stands alone. He has given to love a moral significance, a place and power amongst those substantial elements on which rest the dignity of man's being and the greatness of his destiny, in a way which is, I believe, without example in any other poet."[2]

[1] *Sordello*, by Jeanie Morison, pp. 111-12.

[2] *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*, p. 160.

In the lowest forms of love he recognizes its purifying and redeeming influence. He is repelled by no ugliness in these unhallowed unions, for he believes that

> "Warm
> Beneath the veriest ash, there hides a spark of soul
> Which, quickened by love's breath, may yet pervade the whole."[1]

When Browning, leaving human love for the Divine, is confronted by the difficulty that misery, sin, pain, and death abound, though Love is declared to reign supreme, he calls philosophy to aid his theology. "All's Love," he says, "yet all's Law,"[2] for love has made the law. The commandments written in our hearts were inscribed therein by the pen of Love. Love spoke in the awful thunders of Sinai, for Justice is only another manifestation of Love.[3] In this connection we may recall what has been previously said.

God's love is unlimited in its self-sacrifice, and there is no difficulty in believing that the dread machinery of sin, pain, and sorrow were devised to evolve the moral qualities of man, "to make him love in turn, and be beloved."[4] The development theory applied to the mystery of sin and pain will help us to solve many riddles.

[1] *Fifine at the Fair.* [2] *Saul.*

[3] See George Macdonald's fine discourse, "Love Thy Neighbour," *Unspoken Sermons*, p. 191.

[4] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 1375-86.

Our moral progress can be made only by resistance; as we do not oil the railway lines to make the locomotive run easy, but sand them to increase the grip, so Divine Providence, instead of making our path through life of a dead-level smoothness, has placed difficulties and roughnesses in our way that we may overcome them, and gain strength in the process. Love has often denied us the oil we have passionately prayed for.

CHAPTER XI

HEREDITY

BROWNING'S arch-criminal Guido, awaiting execution in his dungeon, casts aside at last his hypocrisy, finesse, and laboured excuses, and in the face of approaching death tries to deal honestly with himself; but it is a hard matter, and Browning has finely drawn for us the picture of an ingrain villain, who having all his life deceived the world and worn a mask, at last finds the mask has so grown to his face that for the life of him he cannot tear it off, and see what manner of man he really is. He exclaims to the priests who come to prepare him for death—

> "Oh, how I wish some cold, wise man
> Would dig beneath the surface which you scrape,
> Deal with the depth, pronounce on my desert,
> Groundedly!"

What is he to say to God? He can only ask Him to wipe out the being of him, to smear his soul from off His white of things he blots. He recognizes that he is one huge and sheer

mistake. "Whose fault?" he asks, and hypocrite as he is, declares it is

"Not mine at least, who did not make myself!"

So he falls back on the doctrine of heredity, a very favourite theory with our scientific men now-a-days. There are no crimes now, only blunders. Guido will only admit that at the worst he stood in doubt at a cross-road, took one of many paths; the one he unfortunately selected leads him to the scaffold. Ah! if there had been one primrose the less on the bank, one singing-bird the less on the bough, it would have warned him from the fatal road!

But that is just the dreadful test of life. It always does depend on that choice of the moment. It is this which invests the moments of life with their immense importance, an importance which no poet has estimated so fully as Browning.

"Oh, moment one and infinite!"

How all we perceive and know in the world just tends to some moment's product, so that we are named and known for ever by that moment's feat![1]

The way in which Browning urges upon us the infinite importance of the "Now" is terrible. Nature is so imperious with us, brings us to a

[1] *By the Fireside.*

point in our lives where we have to make in an instant a decision of eternal importance. "The moment eternal," the poet calls it.

> "Out of your whole life give but a moment!
> All of your life that has gone before,
> All to come after it,—so you ignore,
> So you make perfect the present."[1]

"This tick of our life-time" to decide all for us—it seems horrible, cruel. Yet is it not so? There is no getting away from the fact, and be we Atheist or Theist, Sceptic or Believer, the Now brooks no delay. Yet if we reflect a little it is not so unjust as it seems. Man's whole life and training is to fit him to do the right thing at the critical moment; he who fails at this juncture fails not because he by mere accident took the wrong path, or made a bad guess, or lost his stake; he fails because he has not so ordered his previous life that he might instinctively do the right thing at a push. Psychology teaches us that "consciousness has not one-tenth part of the function it is usually assumed to have in the ordinary mental operations of each waking hour."

Guido ought not to have had any doubt when he stood at the cross-ways, a true instinct should have warned him of the "red thing" at the end of the road he chose, primrose-decked and bird-carolled though it was at the outset. But this

[1] *Now.*

saving automatism does not come by lucky inspiration, it has to be acquired; heredity does a good deal, it is true, but the habit of self-restraint, of purity of intention, and singleness of eye, is a life's-work to gain, and when acquired we need not count primroses and singing-birds when choosing roads—we shall know without counting. How does the workman acquire his trick of the tool, and the blind man obtain sight at his practised finger-ends? Is it not by habitude? Guido regretted that he had no one to advise him when he took the first false step. The problem would be in such a life as his to discover which was the first false step. He protests that as he did not make himself, he cannot see where his fault lies.

He seems to have done his utmost to unbosom himself in the presence of death. He says—

> "I have gone inside my soul,
> And shut its door behind me."

Till the last moment he brags of his hate, his defiance of God and Church, is proud that it is not in him to unhate his hates, and declares that he uses his last strength to re-murder in his heart the victims he did to death before. To the last minute he did not know himself; then he hears the voices of the death-chant as the Brethren of the Misericordia descend the

dungeon stairs to conduct him to his doom; then happens what the Pope surmised—as the lightning-flash at Naples at midnight revealed the city in all its dazzling beauty, so Guido saw himself, his sin, and his God, in the same instant, and cried in his agony—

> "Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, . . .
> Pompilia, will you let them murder me?"

In *Halbert and Hob* two men, father and son, of brutal type, and the last of their line, are sitting quarrelling one Christmas night in their homestead. High words, followed by taunts and curses, led to an attack on the father by his furious son, who flew at his throat with the intention of casting him out in the snow. The father was strong, and could have held his own in the scuffle, but suddenly all power left him—he was struck mute. This still more enraged the son, who pulled him from the room till they reached the house door-sill. Slowly the father found utterance, and told his son that on just such a Christmas night long ago he had attacked his father in a similar manner, and had dragged him to the same spot, when he was arrested by a voice in his heart. "I stopped here; and, Hob, do you the same!" The son relaxed his hold of his father's throat, and both returned up-stairs, where they remained in silence. At dawn the father was dead, the son insane.

"'Is there a reason in nature for these hard hearts?' O, Lear,
That a reason out of nature must turn them soft, seems clear!"

The hereditary character of crime expressed in this story was recognized by Aristotle, who tells a similar tale of a man dragged by his hair to the door by his son. The father exclaimed, "Enough, enough, my son; I did not drag my father beyond this."

I was once shown some great albums full of photographs of criminals at one of our London police-stations. Ninety per cent. bore in their features and formation of their heads evidence which plainly enough told to the most superficial observer they were God's "huge and sheer mistakes," as Guido called himself in mockery. The others were not so obviously degenerate, but some of them with a little care could be distinguished as persons of a low, cunning, evil type of countenance. Lombroso, the anthropologist, once put before a class of thirty-two young girls twenty portraits of thieves and twenty of great men. Eighty per cent. of these girls at once recognized the first as bad people and the second as good. Those who have opportunities of examining prisoners in large numbers, well know the monotony and family likeness of the criminal countenance. It has often been argued that such persons have been

born under conditions that compelled them to become criminal; but it must not be forgotten that long habituation to crime produces the criminal type of face, just as the saintly countenance is the product of the devout and holy soul. The shape of the head and its relation to the development of the brain have more to do with heredity and responsibility. The oxycephalic or sugar-loaf form of head shows defective organization, and has been called the satanic type. Such a formation of head when complete, with a prominent base supporting an inclined pyramid more or less truncated, "announces the monstrous alliance of the most eminent faculty of man, genius, with the most pronounced impulses to rape, murder, and theft."[1]

Mr. Havelock Ellis states that "of the inmates of the Elmira Reformatory 499, or 13·7 per cent., have been of insane or epileptic heredity. Of 233 prisoners at Auburn, New York, 23·03 per cent. were clearly of neurotic (insane, epileptic, etc.) origin; in reality many more. Virgilio found that 195 out of 266 criminals were affected by diseases that are usually hereditary. Rossi found 5 insane parents to 71 criminals, 6 insane brothers and sisters, and 14 cases of insanity among more distant relatives. Kock found morbid inheritance in 46 per cent. of criminals.

[1] Lauvergne, quoted by Havelock Ellis in *The Criminal*, p. 50.

Mano, who has examined the matter very carefully, found the proportion 77 per cent., and by taking into consideration a large range of abnormal characters in the parents, the proportion of criminals with bad heredity rose to 90 per cent. He found that an unusually large proportion of the parents had died from cerebro-spinal diseases and from phthisis. Sichard, examining nearly 4000 German criminals in the prison of which he is Director, found an insane, epileptic, suicidal, and alcoholic heredity in 36·8 per cent. incendiaries, 32·2 per cent. thieves, 28·7 per cent. sexual offenders, 23·6 per cent. sharpers. Penta found, among the parents of 184 criminals, only 4 to 5 per cent. who were quite healthy."[1]

We do not know much of the family history of the villain Guido, but we know that his mother was a dragon, and his brother Girolamo a bad, licentious man. He had his notions about heredity too, and thought his faults were not his own, as he did not make himself. How far was he right, if right at all? "Legal opinion and practice as regards the responsibility of criminals for their acts are not in accord with the teachings of medical science."[2] Mr. Justice Brett once said, on a trial for murder,[3] "The man may be mad. I assume that he is so in the medical

[1] *The Criminal*, pp. 92, 93.
[2] Woodman and Tidy, *Forensic Medicine*, p. 871.
[3] See *Lancet*, July 31, 1875.

sense of the term; but the question here is, whether he is so mad as to be absolved from the consequences of what he has done? He is not so absolved, though he is mad, if he be not so mad as not to know what he was doing, or not to know that he was doing wrong." This common-sense principle of our law is no doubt a far safer one for the community than the more scientific medical view. In the poem *Halbert and Hob*, the story of which we have told above, the poet makes Halbert hear the voice of conscience speaking in his heart. The son, warned by the father, relaxes his hold of the old man's throat. Heredity and insanity notwithstanding, the Divine Monitor made itself heard in these degraded souls, and the supremacy of conscience was vindicated in both cases. Browning intends to teach us here that the moral sense asserts itself in the most degenerate souls.

Nor can we study the case of Count Guido and his ingenious defence, full of casuistry and fox-like cleverness, without recognizing that had he bent his mind to virtue as he had devoted his abilities to evil and selfishness, he could have extricated himself from the bondage of his heredity. The question arises, how far we can justify the ways of God to man when we know that mortals are hourly born into the world so heavily handicapped in their physical and mental constitutions that they are bound to succumb to

temptation and fail in life's race. Is any one not actually insane—and such a one by the hypothesis would not be likely to argue about it—justified in believing that "he is as completely the result of his nature, and impelled to do what he does as the needle turns to the pole, or the puppet obeys the pull of the string"? Has God the right, according to our best human judgment, to send into the world those who are as certain to break the moral law as the elements are certain to obey the natural law? We cannot imagine that a just God would act thus; the question is, has the God in whom we believe actually done anything of the sort? We must not skip difficulties. Browning never does that. He declares that in every man there is an eye instructed by an inner sense to distinguish the light of heaven from the dark of hell, and that the worst man living has a conscience that tells him what right is, though he may never obey it.[1] The obscuration of that light, and the hardening of the heart against that voice, are the acts of the man and not the fault of God. That heredity may hinder us is true enough; it is not less true that heredity on the whole helps us far more than it impedes. If the good and bad traits of the parent were not transmitted to the child, every one born into the world would have to start the business of

[1] *Christmas Eve.*

life on his own account, without any capitalized experience. There could be no such thing as progress. We should have to learn everything afresh, and every child would be worse off intellectually than the child of prehistoric man. A child may be a congenital idiot, but then he is not a responsible being, and has a claim on the sympathy and charity of the world. He may by the fault or affliction of his parents be the subject of epilepsy and other diseases which tend to weaken if not destroy his responsibility. Browning does not discuss exceptional, pathological cases like these, which after all are, for practical purposes, a negligible quantity in the argument. Short of actual mental disease, we have to face the problem how far the descent of bad tendencies from parent to child affects that person's position before his Creator. Browning says, admitting the hereditary tendency to evil, which may sometimes amount to a double dose of original sin, there is for compensation in every one a supernatural monitor warning and enlightening us—"a reason out of nature" to turn hard hearts soft.[1]

[1] *Halbert and Hob.*

CHAPTER XII

PRAYER

"Is it proper to pray?" asks St. Thomas Aquinas, and in answering the question he says: "We must so lay down the utility of prayer as neither to attribute any fatality to the course of human history, subject as it is to Providence; nor, again, reckon the divine arrangement to be alterable."[1] God is All-wise, All-good, All-mighty.

> "How then should man, the all-unworthy, dare
> Propose to set aside a thing ordained?
> To pray means—substitute man's will for God's.
> . . . . . .
> Yet man—the foolish, weak, and wicked—pray!
> Urges 'My best were better, didst Thou know!'"[2]

This is a fair example of the popular objection to prayer made by those who have no claim to tell us what prayer really is. No thoughtful Christian desires to substitute his will for God's, nor does prayer consist merely in begging from the Supreme some coveted boon.

[1] *Summa*, Pt. II.—II., Qu. lxxxiii., Art 2.
[2] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "The Family."

"Prayer," said Thomas Carlyle, in a letter to a young friend, "is a turning of one's soul, in heroic reverence, in infinite desire and endeavour, towards the Highest, the All-excellent, Supreme. Prayer is the aspiration of our poor, struggling, heavy-laden soul towards its Eternal father, and, with or without words, ought not to become impossible, nor need it ever. Loyal sons and subjects can approach the King's throne who have no 'request' to make there, except that they may continue loyal."

Browning makes his objector to prayer argue that "two best wills cannot be," but prayer which omits "Thy will be done" carries its own rejection. Says St. Thomas—"Divine Providence not only arranges what effects are to take place, but also from what causes and in what order they are to arise. Now among other causes human acts count as causes of certain effects. Hence men need to do sundry things, not that by their acts they may alter the divine plan, but that by their acts they may fulfil certain effects according to the order arranged by God. And so it is with prayer; for we do not pray to alter the divine plan, but to obtain what God has arranged to be fulfilled by prayers, 'to the end that men by asking may deserve to obtain what God Almighty before all ages has arranged to give them,' as Gregory says."[1]

[1] *Summa*, ut supra.

In prayer we raise our minds to God, and hold converse with Him. If there be nought but cold, inflexible "Law" above us, then indeed it would be useless to pray. Men do not invoke the law of gravitation, nor seek to arrest the march of the seasons; but God is our Father, and the laws of the universe are His modes of working. "He is not the mere figure-head of the ship, which sails with it, but cannot steer it," as has been well said, but He is the governing power of the universe and the Father of our spirits. Browning therefore bids us not be overwise, nor try to discard our humanity—

> "No, be man and nothing more—
> Man who, as man conceiving, hopes and fears,
> And craves and deprecates, and loves, and loathes,
> And bids God help him, till death touch his eyes
> And show God granted most, denying all."[1]

Dr. Wm. Barry, in an admirable article in the *Nineteenth Century* for August 1895, entitled *A Defence of Prayer*, reminds us that Professor Huxley declared "that it is not upon any *à priori* considerations that objections, either to the supposed efficacy of prayer in modifying the course of events, or to the supposed occurrence of miracles, can be scientifically based. The real objection is the adequacy of the evidence." The Bishop goes on to explain that Professor Huxley,

[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "The Family."

Stuart Mill, Du Bois Raymond, and other extreme Agnostics, "say deliberately that the study of phenomena has not revealed that 'necessary connection' of events which alone would hinder the Divine Will, if there is a Divine Will, from disposing of them as men do in their own restricted sphere, and at the petition of their fellows." Browning's conception of God is on this wise—

"All changes at His instantaneous will,
Not by the operation of a law
Whose maker is elsewhere at other work.
His hand is still engaged upon His world—
Man's praise can forward it, man's prayer suspend."[1]

Browning's noblest and most beautiful female character, Pompilia, dying in her convent bed, tells the long story of her prayers to God. Man helped her not, prelates hindered and rebuffed her. When all lights were quenched inside "God's glimmer came through the ruin-top"—

"God, who makes the storm desist,
Can make an angry violent heart subside";[2]

and so she

"Sent prayer like incense up
To God the strong, God the beneficent."[3]

For our own good she thinks He makes the

[1] *Luria*, Act V.
[2] *The Ring and the Book*: "Pompilia," ll. 1101-2.
[3] *Ibid.*, ll. 1384-85.

need extreme, till He puts forth His might and saves, for "prayers move God." True, the experience of a long life seldom fails to teach us that God often grants most by denying all, for we know not what to pray for as we ought. In praying for temporal blessings this is sufficiently obvious, it is less so with reference to spiritual gifts. "Some tell us that a man is to pray for spiritual benefits, not expecting that God will deign to notice him—but because it is a mode of influencing his own heart. What! can a man go, as if before God, and say, 'O God, I ask Thee to subdue this or that evil desire, knowing that Thou hearest not, but hoping that by this conscious fiction I shall call my own soul into action?'"[1]

Browning answers such an objection in the poem entitled "Two Camels" in *Ferishtah's Fancies*. We are dependents upon God; not His equals. We are to desire joy and all other blessings and thank God for them, otherwise we abjure our creatureship, isolate ourselves, and own no more than ourselves give ourselves, yet God has undoubtedly implanted wants which only His power can meet and gratify. Browning rebukes this attitude of indifference, and tells us that God has contrived our necessities that He may supply them; the ear hungry for music, the eye before which He unfolds the rainbow. We

[1] F. W. Newman, *The Soul*, p. 119.

could never know God, were knowledge all our faculty. He must for ever be ignored in that case, but

> "Love gains Him by first leap.
> Frankly accept the creatureship; ask good
> To love for." [1]

It must be good for us to feel that "there is a holy will at the root of nature and destiny," to believe that God, in the Person of His Son, does not disdain to slake His thirst at the poorest love ever offered, that He suffers us to follow Him, and by prayer and praise reach the garment's hem.[2] If we have not communion with God, then our loneliness is horrible. "That way madness lies," says one who knew well what life was if not cheered by converse with the Infinite.

"We dream alone, we suffer alone, we die alone, we inhabit the last resting-place alone. But there is nothing to prevent us from opening our solitude to God. And so what was an austere monologue becomes dialogue, reluctance becomes docility, renunciation passes into peace, and the sense of painful defeat is lost in the sense of recovered liberty — *Tout est bien, mon Dieu m'enveloppe.*" [3]

[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Pillar at Sebzevah."
[2] *Christmas Eve.*
[3] *Amiel's Journal*, Introduction, lxix., vol. i.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FOUR LAST THINGS: DEATH, JUDGMENT, HEAVEN, AND HELL

IN all ages and in all places mankind has looked upon death as a passage to another state of existence. It is a common practice with Christian apologists to argue "that the very idea of immortality which the soul possesses, and its intense longing for its possession, prove the fact."[1] St. Augustine says[2]—"The soul can conceive the thought of immortality; therefore it is an immortal being, distinct from the body." Too much stress, however, must not be laid upon this line of argument. The mind of man can conceive the thought of many things which are not true. One of the commonest ideas amongst savages is that all diseases are caused by evil spirits. This is the most ancient and universal theory of sickness. Many tribes of savages, and many races of men far removed from savagery, have held the belief that the

[1] Hettinger, *Natural Religion*, p. 236.
[2] *C. Gentes*, 81 *seq.*

weapons and personal objects of the deceased warrior can be sent to accompany him in the life beyond the grave if they are "killed" by being broken and cast into the grave with the corpse. Nor is there any great uniformity amongst the notions of savage people as to the future state of the soul. Anthropologists trace such beliefs as exist to animism.

The national religion of the Maori race is the worship of the *Atua*, or the personified Powers of Nature, which are looked upon by the Maori as their own primitive ancestors. They also addressed prayers to the spirits of dead ancestors of their own line of descent. These invocations were called *karakia*, and of course presuppose a belief in the existence of the soul after death.[1]

When the spirit leaves the body, it is supposed to go on its way northward till it arrives at two hills. The first is named Wai-hokimai, and is a place on which to lament with wailings and cuttings, a kind of purgatory; there the spirit strips off its clothes. Arriving at the other hill, called Wai-otioti, the spirit turns its back on the land of life, and goes on to the spirits' leap; it then reaches a river which it crosses. The name of the new-comer is shouted out. He is made welcome, and food is given to him; if he eats this he can never return to life.[2]

[1] Shortland, *Maori Religion and Mythology*, p. 11.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

The North American Indians venerate the Rocky Mountains, which they call the Bridge of the World. They believe that the Master of Life, the Great Spirit, resides in one of the highest peaks. Paradise is there, the happy hunting-ground which cannot be seen by mortal eyes. The generous and good free spirits, who in their lifetime sought to please the Great Spirit, now enjoy everlasting happiness with him in the Land of Souls. Those who have done righteously in their mortal life dwell in bliss in this delightful country. Those who have done evil must roam for ever about sterile, sandy plains, suffering hunger and thirst, tormented by the glimpse they had of the felicity of their companions who have entered the heavenly fields.[1]

Amongst the Anglo-Saxons a place of torment and punishment was believed in, called Nástrond, the strand of the dead, filled with foulness, peopled with poisonous serpents, dark, cold, and gloomy. This Nástrond was what we call Hell.[2]

The Sonora Indians say that departed souls dwell among the caves and rocks of the cliffs, and that the echoes often heard are their voices.[3]

The Druids inculcated that the soul does not

[1] Domenech, *Deserts of North America*, vol. i., p. 283.
[2] Kemble, vol. i., pp. 392-93.
[3] Alger, *Doctrine of a Future Life*, p. 208.

perish, but passes after death from one body to another.[1]

Egyptologists tell us that from the mass of ancient Egyptian fetishism, superstition, and polytheism, one dogma stands out clearly, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. "The idea of death, as it prevailed among the Egyptians, appears to have been not merely that a separation was thereby effected between that part of man which was mortal and that which was not; but the soul of man was itself regarded as composite, and its component elements, which 'had found their common home in the living body,' were supposed to set out independently 'each . . . to find its own way to the gods.' If all succeeded in doing so, and it was further proved that the deceased had been good and upright, they again became one with him, and so entered into the company of the blessed, or even of the gods.

"In the Egyptian anthropology or eschatology, the *Ka* [was] 'the divine counterpart of the deceased, holding the same relation to him as a word to the conception which it expresses,' his '*Doppel-gänger*'; the *Ab* or heart [was] symbolized by the scarabæus; the *Ba* or soul [was] symbolized by a bird; the *Sahu* [was the] bodily form; the *Khaib*, the shadow; and the *Osiris* or personal character [was] regarded as still sur-

[1] Cæsar, *De Bello Gall.*, vi. 14.

viving. In his Osiris a man was judged; the adventures of the Osiris after death form the theme of the *Book of the Dead*, which is 'the largest and best known work in the religious literature of the nation.'

"'*The Book of the Dead*, and cognate religious texts, always assume that judgment goes in favour of the deceased, that his heart approves him, and that he becomes one of the blessed. Nowhere are we clearly informed as to the fate of the condemned who could not stand before the God Osiris. We are told that the enemies of the gods perish, that they are destroyed or overthrown; but such vague expressions afford no certainty as to how far the Egyptians in general believed in the existence of a hell as a place of punishment or purification for the wicked; or whether, as seems more probable, they held some general belief that when judgment was pronounced against a man, his heart and other immortal parts were not restored to him. For such a man no re-edification and no resurrection was possible. The immortal elements were divine, and by nature pure and imperishable; but they could be preserved from entering the *Osiris*, from re-entering the hull of the man who had proved himself unworthy of them.'"[1]

[1] From a review of *The Ancient Doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul*, by Alfred Wiedemann, D.Ph., etc., in the *Tablet*.

That death does not end all seems to be the belief of all the races of men, and all the religions of the world are based upon that belief. Extinction is the idea the most repugnant to mankind, the soul revolts at the thought, and humanity has always been inclined to reject it.

In his poem *Prospice*, and his final words to us in the Epilogue to *Asolando*, the poet has sufficiently shown us that he had no fear of death. "The Arch Fear," demanding and receiving "life's arrears of pain, darkness, and cold," would do his work in one black minute, "and with God be the rest!"[1] In *Saul* he refers to "death's minute of night" as introductory to "life's dayspring," the present life being only "life's dream."[2] Cleon, in the poem of that name, expresses the popular horror of death, but unillumined by the hope of immortality—

> "Sleep in my urn. It is so horrible,
> I dare at times imagine to my need
> Some future state."[3]

The horrible thought of death here expressed is plainly the thought of extinction. The Christian, on the other hand, is represented in the poet's works as entering by the gate of death to the realm of eternal day. The dying Paracelsus exclaims confidently—

[1] *Prospice.* [2] *Saul.* [3] *Cleon.*

"If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; it's splendour, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day."[1]

In the *Epistle of Karshish* we have a wonderful and profoundly beautiful description of the mental state of Lazarus after his resurrection. "He knows God's secret while he holds the thread of life"; he is "witless of the size, the sum, the value in proportion of all things." Guido, the villain of the *Ring and the Book*, says—

"You never know what life means till you die.
Even throughout life, 'tis death that makes life live,
Gives it whatever the significance."

And so Lazarus, having seen behind the veil, has had his eyes opened to the truth about life. It was not, as the Arab physician judged, that Lazarus had lost the idea of proportion in things; the fact was, he alone of all living men had the true sense of the size and sum of things. "The trifling fact" had "prodigious import," while the "prodigious armaments" had little significance.

"Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,
Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven."[2]

The angry word of a child to such an one would mean worlds more than a prince's ransom or a great victory. Browning never trembles at

[1] *Paracelsus.* [2] *An Epistle.*

death, but, as we have seen, he often seems to stand appalled at the terrible importance of life, and the value of the present moment to each one of us. The "moment one and infinite"[1] to which all we have perceived and known in the world made for each of us has tended, so that we are

> "Named and known by that moment's feat,"[2]

and therein our small life has become complete.

How pathetic and terrible is that reflection on what might have been the lot of the young couple in *Youth and Art*, whose lives were unfulfilled, and were patchy and scrappy in consequence. They had their chance of ennobling and completing each other's life—

> "This could but have happened once,
> And we missed it, lost it for ever."

So Lowell sings in more heroic strains—

"Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by for ever 'twixt that darkness and that light."

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[1] *By the Fireside.* [2] *Ibid.*

Nothing is more opposed to Browning's teaching than to consider life as a lottery; there is nothing allowed to chance in his view of life. What he means by the moment's opportunity, is that by always living up to our highest ideals, by utilizing all the evil and the good, the vexations and disappointments as well as the acquisitions and successes, to build up the edifice of our character, we shall be ready when presented with the great opportunity that one time or another comes to every one of us, to seize it and win from it our salvation from the domination of our lower selves; to perfect the crystallization of our nobler humanity, and derive the impetus for our diviner spirit that shall lead us on to God. "Habit is a cable. We weave a thread of it every day, and at last we cannot break it." At first cobwebs, the spinning of which are acts of virtue, the cable is completed which restrains us in spite of the temptations of our lower nature from yielding to sin.

Browning's view of death is the corollary of his philosophy of life. The poet's arch-villain, Count Guido, as we remarked, afforded the Pope little hope for his salvation except in a sudden flash of truth at the moment of death. The Pontiff exclaims—

"I stood at Naples once, a night so dark
I could have scarce conjectured there was earth

Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all :
But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore,
Through her whole length of mountain visible :
There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.
So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved." [1]

In *Easter Day* Browning gives us a Vision of Judgment.

A Voice beside the beholder says—

"Life is done,
Time ends, Eternity's begun,
And thou art judged for evermore."

The doomed one had deliberately chosen the world ; the things of time and sense, for these he had fought and sighed ; the truth of God, the best and noblest things, had not interested him. His sentence was that he should take and for ever keep the partial good, the lower beauty for which he had struggled. He was at first transported with the idea. "Mine—the World?" he asked. "Yes," said the awful Judge, "if you are satisfied with one rose, thrown to you over the Eden-barrier which excludes you from its glory—take it!"

Our greatest punishment would be the gratification of our lowest aims. The Judge saw the thought in the man's heart, read the

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 2117-26.

joy with which the sense of possessing all the beauty of the world filled it, and told him he was welcome thus to esteem the mere hangings of the vestibule of the Palace of the Supreme. The man read his error in the scorn of the awful gift, and asked for Art in the place of Nature. That too was conceded; he should obtain the one form the sculptors laboured to abstract, the one face the painters tried to portray, the perfection in their soul which these only hinted at. But the man was made to see that the perfection of form, the completeness of earthly things that can only serve earth's ends, transferred to a future state would be the dreariest deficiency. Neither the World nor the World of Art could suffice to satisfy his disembodied state, and he cried in anguish—"Mind is best—I will seize mind—forego the rest!" And again it was answered to him that all the best of mind on earth—the intuition, the grasps of guess, the efforts of the finite to comprehend the infinite, the gleams of heaven which come to sting with hunger for the full light of God, the inspiration of poetry, the truth hidden in fable, all these were God's part, and in no wise to be considered as inherent in the mind of man. Loving God, he loves His inspirations; bereft of them in the world he had chosen, mind would not avail to light the cloud he had entered. And so the bleeding spirit of the humbled man prays for love

alone. And God said, "Is this thy final choice: Love is best? 'Tis somewhat late! Love was all about thee, curled in its mightiness around all thou hadst to do with. Take the show of love for the name's sake; but remember Who created thee to love, died for love of thee, and thou didst refuse to believe the story, on the ground that the love was too much." Cowering deprecatingly, the man, who now saw the whole truth of God, cried, "Thou Love of God! Let me not know that all is lost! Let me go on hoping to reach one eve the Better Land!" The man awoke, and behold it was a dream. A beautiful dream, but no more; for we cannot conceive it probable that life, the only probation time allotted to us, being over, we shall be suddenly illumined so as to make sudden choice of better things, after clutching at baser gifts one after another. If this were possible, it would do away with the whole purpose of our life, and our school-time, our struggles and trials, would have been all in vain, if in a short discussion with our Judge at last we should be allowed to choose again and again under the influence of His prompting. Browning does not intend us to believe this, it is opposed to his whole philosophy of our earthly life. As a dream it is suggestive enough; it shows us how we may estimate the worth of things if we seek the light of God's spirit. The possibility of nobleness in man depends upon the fact that he has death to

fear. We know not what may await us; the mysterious "something after death" is the great factor that influences our lives. Whatever we may think about a future state, all believers in a Supreme Being hold that "Earth is God's antechamber,"[1] and eternity the whole series of spheres; time but a single sphere.[2]

Browning regards the destiny of the soul as an eternal progress. The steps we take in this life place our souls under advantages or disadvantages never relatively to be lost. This much seems certain. Heaven is that state in which we shall practise what we have learned on earth. The heavenly period is to perfect the earthen.[3] And what of future punishment? "There may be Heaven; there must be Hell,"[4] he says.

The fact of a just and varied future punishment seems not to be doubted by Browning. We find no reference to any idea of a place of purposeless, vengeful, eternal torment in his works. His idea of Hell is

> "That sad, obscure, sequestered state
> Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
> He else made first in vain; which must not be."[5]

Hell in Browning's idea, then, is not the eternal

[1] *Easter Day.* [2] *Sordello.*
[3] *A Grammarian's Funeral.*
[4] *Time's Revenges.*
[5] *The Ring and the Book:* "The Pope," ll. 2130-32.

prison of lost souls, for God can be absent nowhere, and he teaches that—

> "In His face
> Is light, but in His shadow healing too."[1]

And so, as the poet contemplates the bodies of the poor suicides in the Morgue, he reflects—

> "That what began best, can't end worst,
> Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst."[2]

"Shall nature fill the hollows of her coarse rough flints with purple amethyst; shall she, out of the grimy coal, over which the shivering beggar warms himself, form the diamond that trembles on the forehead of a queen; shall even man take the cast-off slag and worthless rubble of the furnace and educe from it his most glowing and lustrous dyes—and shall *God* not be able to make anything of his ruined souls?"[3]

Browning's hope is that He will! He gives us, however, a hard case to study in the character of Guido, who says of his wife he has murdered,

> "It would prove her hell, if I reached mine!
> To know I suffered, would still sadden her,
> Do what the angels might to make amends!
> Therefore there's either no such place as hell,
> Or thence shall I be thrust forth, for her sake."[4]

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[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "Pompilia," ll. 1720-21.
[2] *Apparent Failure.*
[3] F. W. Farrar, *Eternal Hope.*
[4] *The Ring and the Book:* "Guido," ll. 2090-94.

But such is his hate, so implacable, persistent in revenge is he, that with outlet for escape to heaven he would tarry in hell, lest his escape should gratify his foe.

Count Guido was not well up in his scholastic theology, or he would have remembered that St. Thomas Aquinas says[1]—"That the saints may enjoy their beatitude and the grace of God more richly, a perfect sight of the punishment of the damned is granted to them."

The impenitence of Guido reminds us that theologians who adhere to the doctrine of the Eternity of Future Punishment, maintain that the lost will continue for ever sinning as well as suffering, becoming more and more impenitent as their torments continue.

In the remarkable poem *Ixion* Browning seems to represent the popular idea of an avenging God, and his own attitude towards the doctrine of eternal punishment. It is, however, only the caricature of God created by popular misconception at which the poet aims, whatever may have to be said of his opinions concerning eschatology. Ixion is represented as comparing himself with his torturer—

"Behold us!
Here the revenge of a God, there the amends of a Man,"

a man whose bodily powers were constantly renewed, as the old theologians explained, to

[1] *Summa*, Pt. III., Suppl. Qu. 93, Art. 1.

enable him to suffer. Above the torment is a rainbow, built of the vapour, pain-wrung, which the light of heaven, in passing, tinges with the hues of hope. Ixion was but man foiled by sense; he has endured enough suffering to teach him his error and his folly. "Why make the agony perpetual?" "To punish thee," Zeus may reply. But would not an earthly sovereign, were he able to read the hearts of the criminals brought before him, and could plainly see repentance there, give them

"Life to retraverse the past, light to retrieve the misdeed"?

Zeus made man with flaw or faultless; it was his work. Man has conceived Zeus as possessing his own virtues; he trusted, loved him because Zeus aspired to be equal in goodness to man. Ixion defies him, tells him he apes the man who made him. The iris, born of Ixion's tears, sweat, and blood, bursting to vapour above, arching his torment, glorifies his pain; and man, even from hell's triumph, may look up and rejoice. He rises from the wreck, past Zeus, to the Potency above him—

"Thither I rise, whilst thou—Zeus, keep the godship and sink!"

The Zeus of the poem is not the Christian's God. Our God is the Potency over all, the God of Love, who yet in Infinite Love may punish rebellious men, who rejecting His love with soul

unsoftened by one warm tear of repentance, may suffer till God's shadow brings the healing influence. Ixion repented, but Zeus continued to punish. He appealed to "the Potency over all," which is Browning's way of saying he appeals from the low conception of God to the higher as revealed in Christ. Eternal loss is Browning's idea of Hell. By just so much is our knowledge here, by just so much as that knowledge is neglected, perverted to evil, by that amount is our future punishment ensured. "No punishment like knowledge." The spurning of the steps offered to our feet, steps whereby we might have risen to higher things, "that," says the poet,

"I call Hell; why further punishment?"[1]

And what of Heaven?

"There is
Heaven, since there is Heaven's simulation—Earth."[2]

"The gain of Earth," he says, "must be Heaven's gain too."[3] Because the conquests of the soul remain with the soul for ever, for "there can never be one lost good,"[4] it follows that all the good the soul has gained on earth stays with it in the future state and becomes perfected.

The soul is for each of us a world, it floats in an aura, illumined by the light-beams flashed

[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Camel-Driver."
[2] *The Inn Album.*
[3] *By the Fireside.* [4] *Abt Vogler.*

from a universe some find so dead and cold. These beams pass into the soul, add worth to worth, and send it conquering and to conquer through all eternity. Browning says he cannot see what purpose serves the soul that strives, or world it tries conclusions with, unless the fruit of victories stay stored up and guaranteed its own for ever in some way that shall make clear the gain of every life. After death we shall learn what our souls have conquered from our past life. We shall see this plainly, and the sooner we begin to see what we are storing up for the future the better. All worth lies in the seeing soul; all the world is inert, null and void, till man evokes the beautiful, and by his alchemy extracts from it light and warmth.

The desire of perfect happiness which exists in every human heart is an argument for a better and brighter world, where the reasonable and pure desire of happiness may be satisfied.

An ethical writer says—"It follows that the desire of perfect happiness is in man by the normal growth of his nature and for the better. But it would be a vain desire, and objectless, if it were essentially incapable of satisfaction; and man would be a made and abiding piece of imperfection, if there were no good accessible to his intellectual nature sufficient to meet its proper exigence of perfect happiness. But no such perfect happiness is

attainable in this world. Therefore there must be a world to come, in which he who was man, now a disembodied spirit, but still the same person, shall under due conditions find a perfect good, the adequate object of his natural desire. Else is the deepest craving of human nature in vain, and man himself is vanity of vanities."

And this future happiness comes as the reward of love. Love gains God, and gaining Him gains Heaven. Love is not to be realized here at all, but is to be completed in another life; this is the lesson of many of Browning's most beautiful poems, notably *Cristina*, *Evelyn Hope*, and *The Last Ride Together*.

"Such is life's trial, as old earth smiles and knows.
If you loved only what were worth your love,
Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you.
Make the low nature better by your throes!
Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!"[1]

[1] Song from *James Lee*.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MYSTERY OF PAIN, DEATH, AND SIN

IN Browning's philosophy of life we have seen that he holds that all the obstacles and troubles of our existence are intended by the Creator to make true men and women of us. We might perhaps dismiss this part of our subject as having been sufficiently explained. But the poet's works so constantly recur to the mystery of pain, death, and sin, and so uniformly emphasize his doctrine of evil, that justice would not be done to his teaching if we neglected to set forth his treatment of the principle of evil a little more fully. Briefly, then, it may be said that Browning never wearies of insisting that the existence of evil is necessary for the development of the soul, that evil has its uses in stimulating the growth of good, that our moral perfection can only be attained by fighting against evil; for life is a passage to a higher state of existence, and we can only mount thither by making our obstacles "stepping-stones on which we may rise to higher things." St. Augustine says—"Of our vices we

can frame a ladder, if we will but tread beneath our feet each deed of shame."

Pain and death have been contrived either by a benevolent or a malignant Creator, or they have merely arisen by chance. If they were contrived by a malevolent Being, it is inconceivable that they should almost uniformly tend to evolve the most beautiful and holy faculties of our nature, and bring in their train the highest blessings to the race. If we say they came by chance, it passes comprehension that these means should have effected such admirable ends without the intention and influence of an all-wise Contriver, and it is easier and more natural to attribute them to God than to believe that blind chance could create saints, and make martyrs welcome the cruelest deaths, for an idea. The mystery of pain has often been urged against the doctrine of an all-loving Creator, yet any physiologist will tell us that without a nervous system capable of suffering pain, no pleasure could be enjoyed, nor the means of enjoying it preserved. Often the line between pain and pleasure is so finely drawn that it is hardly possible to say where one begins and the other ends. Hunger is painful, yet who would not wish to be hungry when invited to a banquet? Thirst is painful: who would know the delights of a deep draught of pure refreshing water in a thirsty land if he had not suffered it?

If fire did not cause the pain of burning, we should handle hot coals with our fingers and soon destroy them. If the fur of an animal could be torn from the skin without pain as it ran through the bushes, he would soon be naked. A grain of dust in the eye will cause intense pain, but if foreign bodies could rest on the delicate surface of the organ of sight without causing irritation, the eye for seeing purposes would soon be destroyed. Pain, therefore, is of the first necessity for our protection and safety. Pain always lasts while there is a possibility of cure. Says Pompilia—

> "The guardian angel discontinued pain
> Because the hope of cure was gone at last:
> The limb will not again exert itself,
> It needs be pained no longer. . . .
> . . . . . .
> All pain must be to work some good in the end."[1]

Susceptibility to pain is essential to every part of our bodily life; if hunger were not painful we should often neglect to take food; if falling about were not painful we should break many more bones than we do. Self-protection is the direct consequence of pain. Then, again, if there were no pain there could be no pleasure, constituted as we are in this stage of our existence—

[1] *The Ring and the Book:* "Caponsacchi," ll. 1220-25.

"Pain's shade enhanced the shine
Of pleasure, else no pleasure!"[1]

Pain is defined as "the representation in consciousness of a change produced in a nerve-centre by a certain mode of excitation. It would seem that some special perturbation of nervous impulses, and not a mere exaltation of the normal functioning of the sensory apparatus, is necessary to the production of pain." The apparatus to which we are indebted for all our pleasures is the means by which we suffer pain. We could not have the machinery of pleasure without the possibility of its disturbance giving rise to suffering. Pain is often the doctor's best guide to diagnosis. Were there no pain it would be often impossible to detect the ailing organ or the disturbed function.

"In the eyes of God
Pain may have purpose and be justified:
Man's sense avails to only see, in pain,
A hateful chance no man but would avert
Or, failing, needs must pity."[2]

Uninterrupted pleasures turn to pain. Pain makes us fight against it, and so becomes an actual tonic. The contest against pain has brought us all that is most valuable in life. We owe to it all our advance in knowledge and all our improvements in civilization. If we had

[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Bean-Stripe," etc.
[2] *Ibid.:* "Mihrab Shah."

never felt fatigue railways would have never been invented; if we had never suffered anxiety we should have had no telegraphs. But above all, pain has created sympathy—

"Put pain from out the world, what room were left
For thanks to God, for love to man?"[1]

"Thanks to God
And love to man,—from man take these away,
And what is man worth?"[2]

Therefore in pain we see the wisdom of God at work. We are so constituted that our hearts tell us that no one deserves to suffer pain; good or bad, humanity concedes that pain must be relieved. The murderer in the condemned cell, the burglar just sentenced, if suffering pain, have as much claim on the anodynes at the prison doctor's command as if they were the chaplain and his wife.

"How were pity understood
Unless by pain? Make evident that pain
Permissibly masks pleasure—you abstain
From outstretch of the finger-tip that saves
A drowning fly."[3]

"Our capacity for sorrow is equally necessary with our susceptibility to pain for our whole moral nature. Sorrow itself is a most essential process for the perfecting of the soul."[4]

[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "Mihrab Shah."
[2] *Ibid.* [3] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.*
[4] F. W. Newman, *The Soul*, p. 44.

Says a spiritual writer: "Although sorrow springs up from the soil over which sin has sown briars wherever we place our foot, it has become transformed into a Divine plant, budding forth beauty, and endowed with a virtue which perhaps nothing else of earthly origin possesses, because the Son of God has touched it and given it a Divine character in the crucible of His own heart."

But the Existence of Moral Evil is to many a far greater mystery than that of physical suffering, yet it is not difficult to show that sin or moral evil is as necessary a part of the Divine scheme as that of physical pain. It is conceivable that every sorrow, disappointment, and trial we have to bear—aye, every breach of the moral law we commit—may be used by God to make us permanently the better. There could be no virtue without the presence of sin in the world, just as without temptation there could be no such thing as moral character.

Having made man free, it was impossible for God to have compelled him to act in any particular way. His freedom would have been destroyed by preventing him from sinning when he felt so inclined; nor in that case would the sin have been really prevented, for if the man had desired to sin the evil would have been present in his intention, even if its fruition in act had been hindered by God. As Dr. Fairbairn

points out[1]—"Evil once intended may be vanquished by being allowed; but were it hindered by an act of annihilation, then the victory would rest with the evil which had compelled the Creator to retrace His steps. And, to carry the prevention backward another stage, if the possibility of evil had hindered the creative action of God, then He would have been, as it were, overcome by its very shadow. But why did He create a being capable of sinning? Only so could He create a being capable of obeying. The ability to do good implies the capability of doing evil. The engine can neither obey nor disobey, and the creature who was without this double ability might be a machine but could be no child. Moral perfection may be attained, but cannot be created; God can make a being capable of moral action, but not a being with all the fruits of moral action garnered within him."

A man cannot be a steam-engine and a man too, but this is what people demand when they deny the existence of an All-wise, Omnipotent, and All-loving Creator, because of the existence of moral evil in a world of moral natures. The independence of the human will necessitates, therefore, the possibility of our moral imperfections.

Browning teaches us that we must "concede a use to evil,"[2] because it is

[1] *Christ in Modern Theology*, p. 456.
[2] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*

"The scheme by which thro' ignorance,
Good labours to exist."[1]

We can only gain knowledge of good by knowledge of evil, good's opposite. Wrong can only be distinguished from right when we know both in each extreme.

Good and evil grow together; what know we

"But proof were gained that every growth of good
Sprang consequent on evil's neighbourhood?"[2]

"Night needs day, shine needs shade, so good needs evil."[3]

Evil under certain circumstances may actually be good, the want may be the promise of supply, the defect may ensure completion. The how and the where we must leave to the First Cause. In *Ferishtah's Fancies* it is demanded why any evil should happen to man? Since God's All-mercy mates All-potency, why do all our ills exist, from ache of flesh to agony of soul? Above all, why does God permit sin? Were it not well could the world exist purged of all pain, inhabited by man pure in thought, word, and deed? The answer is found in the compensations for the miseries of life. What one lacks is found in another. We gain more than we lose. Evil is finite, transitory, and essential to the attainment of all higher and permanent good. There

[1] *Sordello.*
[2] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*
[3] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.*

is nothing in the existence of moral evil to inspire doubt of the Divine goodness—

> "Fair and Good are products
> Of foul and Evil; one must bring to pass the other,
> Just as poisons grow drugs."[1]

Browning cautions us against looking upon evil as a real thing. We are to consider it as shade is considered in relation to shine, or as he puts it in another way in *Abt Vogler*—

> "Evil is null, is nought."

The Cabbalists taught that evil was only the shadow of the Light; Maimonides, Spinoza, Hegel, and Emerson taught the same doctrine. Leibnitz speaks of "evil as a mere set-off to the good in the world, which it increases by contrast, and at other times reduces moral to metaphysical evil by giving it a merely negative existence." "God," argued St. Thomas Aquinas,[2] "created everything that exists, but Sin was *nothing;* so God was not the author of it." So St. Augustine and Peter Lombard maintained likewise the negative nature of moral evil. "Evil is more frail than nonentity."[3]

"Falsehood is change," says Browning, "truth permanence."[4] "Good strives with evil," and

[1] *Pietro of Abano.*
[2] *Sum. Theol.*, i. § 49.
[3] Proclus, *De Prov.*, in Cary's *Fragm.*
[4] *Fifine at the Fair.*

the victory is ever with good. No battle, no victory. Made to know, we must wage war just for soul's instruction, and so we have

> "Pain with joy,
> Folly with wisdom, all that works annoy
> With all that quiets and contents."[1]

Thus it is that for our benefit evil must always stay with us—

> "For mankind springs
> Salvation by each hindrance interposed."[2]

And so Browning teaches us that even our sins help to save our souls. The sense of sin has been said to be the basis of all religions. There is a process, he tells us, of unsinning sin by beginning to do well somehow else.[3] Many of the greatest saints who now stand "full-statured in magnificence" became such by the loathing and disgust excited in their souls by long acquaintance with evil. Just so much knowledge was needed to call forth the spark of good which burnt up the vileness of their lives, and so, the poet tells us—

> "Where the salt marshes stagnate, crystals branch:
> Blood dries to crimson; Evil's beautified
> In every shape. Thrust Beauty then aside
> And banish Evil! Wherefore? After all,
> Is Evil a result less natural than Good?"[4]

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[1] *Parleyings with Francis Furini.* [2] *Sordello.*
[3] *The Ring and the Book:* "Tertium Quid," ll. 285-86.
[4] *Sordello.*

CHAPTER XV

BROWNING'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS SCIENCE

WHEN, in a paper read before the Browning Society, and since published in a little book entitled *Browning's Message to His Time*, I called Browning "a scientific poet," I wished to imply merely that he used a great number of scientific facts to illustrate his imaginative works. Mr. Browning had more than the usual share of scientific knowledge possessed by literary men, and he made good use of his information in his poems from first to last. I did not intend to express at that time any opinion as to Browning's attitude towards physical science, and this omission led to some criticism. My wider acquaintance with the poet's works now enables me to deal with the question from the aspect I neglected on the former occasion. It has often been charged against Browning that he was anti-scientific; that he feared science because it is often supposed to be antagonistic to religion, and that there is evidence in his works that he disparaged knowledge, and rested his theory of

life on Agnosticism. Professor Jones, in his learned and valuable work *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*, devotes many pages of his book to establish this antagonism of the poet to science. Browning's doctrine of evil seems to prove that he rejects the testimony of the head in favour of that of the heart; that "God has not held even ignorance to be too great a price for man to pay for goodness," that "knowledge is not the fit atmosphere for morality. It is faith and not reason, hope and trust but not certainty, that lend vigour to the good life. The heart may trust, and must trust, if it faithfully listens to its own natural voice; but reason must not demonstrate. Ignorance on the side of intellect, faith on the side of the emotions; distrust of knowledge, absolute confidence in love; such is the condition of man's highest welfare; it is only then that the purpose of his life, and of the world which is his instrument, can be achieved" (p. 273). Browning is charged with teaching that it is "impossible to re-establish faith in God, except by turning his back on knowledge." Mr. Jones declares that "Browning appeals in defence of his optimistic faith from the intellect to the heart. His theory rests on three main assumptions, namely—(1) that knowledge of the true nature of things is impossible to man, and that, therefore, it is necessary to find other and better evidence than

the intellect can give for the victory of good over evil; (2) that the failure of knowledge is a necessary condition of the moral life, inasmuch as certain knowledge would render all moral effort futile or needless; (3) that after the failure of knowledge there still remains possible a faith of the heart, which can furnish a sufficient objective basis to morality and religion" (p. 308). The writer grounds on this evidence a charge of "Agnosticism" against Browning, "antagonism to the intellect and distrust of its deliverances." Surely the use of the term "Agnosticism" in this connection is both new and inappropriate.

Browning has done no more than the greatest thinkers from ancient times to the present, who have told us that by searching man cannot find out God. Seeking knowledge has always been held to be like wandering in a labyrinth, the farther we go the farther we are from the end. Byron truly said—"Science is but an interchange of ignorance for that which is another kind of ignorance." And Emerson expressed the same truth when he said—"Knowledge is the knowing that we cannot know." Browning certainly invites us to faith, but "faith does not supplant but supplements reason." He does not disparage knowledge when he points out its limitations. As well argue that the anatomist and physiologist disparage the powers of man

when they tell us that we are not constituted like birds for flying in the air or like fish for living under water. Browning protests against the notion that

> "Man, with the narrow mind, must cram inside
> His finite God's infinitude. . . .
> . . . . . .
> Since Man may claim a right to understand
> What passes understanding."[1]

Man cannot explain his own mind. It is all very well to spell the unknowable with a capital U, and then call sensation, emotion, and thought "modes of the Unknowable" as Mr. Herbert Spencer does, but this is not "golden knowledge," but what Browning terms "lacquered ignorance."[2] No doubt it is vastly comforting to a young scientist to settle the difficulty that way, but it is no better after all than the comfort the old lady obtained from "that blessed word Mesopotamia." Browning was not to be taken in by that sort of wisdom. He knew

> "That becoming wise meant making slow and sure advance
> From a knowledge proved in error to acknowledged ignorance."[3]

Man buys knowledge only to discover that his purchase is absolute nescience.[4] In a sense this

[1] *Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville.*
[2] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Pillar at Sebzevah."
[3] *La Saisiaz.*
[4] *Parleyings with Charles Avison.*

may, of course, be called Agnosticism, but it is not what is usually meant by the term.

Let us test it by an example or two. Browning says—

> "To know of, think about—
> Is all man's sum of faculty effects
> When exercised on earth's least atom, Son!
> What was, what is, what may such atom be?
> No answer! Still, what seems it to man's sense?
> An atom with some properties
> Known about, thought of as occasion needs,
> —Man's—but occasions of the universe?
> Unthinkable, unknowable to man." [1]

Marvels are told us about the atoms, marvels as great as any which Christianity asks us to accept, and so far as our faculties are concerned, not less difficult to demonstrate.

"The atom, as some represent it, is no longer an infrangible mass 'in solid singleness,' as Lucretius described it, and as Newton conceived it, but a ring like the smoke-rings which rise from a locomotive, or from the discharge of a cannon. This ring moves as a whole; at the same time its minute parts revolve at right angles around the circular line constituting the nucleus of the ring, and are indissolubly tied down to their circular paths, and can never quit them. The rings can move and change their form without the connection of the constituent parts ever being broken. Thus in every pebble,

[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Bean-Stripe."

in every visible bit of matter, are millions of these indissoluble systems of vortex-atoms as complicated as the solar system, in which each part revolves in its orbit. And since the vortex-atom itself is inconceivably small, what are its parts, measuring their little years by revolving for ever within it, atoms of an atom, atoms to which the vortex-atom itself is as a universe?"[1]

Again, Browning says—

> "To think and know fire through and through
> Exceeds man."[2]

"Fire is in the flint,"

> "The sun
> Holds earthly substance somehow fire pervades
> And yet consumes not."[3]

The sun is inconceivable by man, who cannot even understand himself, and yet we boast of our science. Let us see what science is, and what are its limitations.

"In each case that which science finds as the essential reality of matter and energy, is that which is imperceptible by sense. The essential reality of the tangible is the intangible; of the audible is the inaudible; of the visible is the invisible; of the divisible is the indivisible; of the perceptible is the imperceptible. Then

[1] Professor Harris, *The Philosophical Basis of Theism*, p. 417.

[2] *Ferishtah's Fancies*: "A Bean-Stripe."

[3] *Ibid.*: "The Sun."

underlying or within the gross matter and its motions which we perceive, is a world of atomic, molecular, and ethereal matter which no human sense can grasp. In this, science presents to our thought a reality of which we can have no perception, and scarcely even a conception as matter."[1]

Browning exclaims—

"Have I knowledge? confounded it shrivels at Wisdom laid bare.

. . . . . .

Perfection, no more and no less,
In the kind I imagined, full-fronts me, and God is seen God
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod."[2]

It is the sense of man's imperfection compared with God's perfection, of man's ignorance compared with the Supreme Wisdom, which compels Browning to depreciate the knowledge of which in these latter days we are so vain. It is the poet's exalted Theism which compels him to ignore the creature when he brings the mind of man into comparison with the Omniscient. But this is surely a very different thing from Agnosticism.

Locke, in his *Essay on the Human Understanding*,[3] points out how many and great are

[1] Professor Harris, *The Philosophical Basis of Theism*, p. 416.

[2] *Saul.* [3] Book IV., chap. iii.

the limitations of Human Knowledge. As knowledge lies in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of any of our ideas, it follows that we can have knowledge no farther than we have ideas. Secondly, that we can have no knowledge farther than we can have perception of that agreement or disagreement; thirdly, that we cannot have an intuitive knowledge that shall extend itself to all our ideas and all that we would know about them; fourthly, our rational knowledge cannot reach to the whole extent of our ideas; fifthly, sensitive knowledge, inasmuch as it can reach no further than the existence of things actually present to our senses, is yet much narrower than either of the former. The extent of our knowledge therefore falls short, not only of the reality of things, but even of the extent of our own ideas about them. "Though our knowledge be limited to our ideas, and cannot exceed them either in extent or perfection; and though these be very narrow bounds in respect of the extent of all being, and far short of what we may justly imagine to be in some even-created understandings not tied down to the dull and narrow information, is to be received from some few and not very acute ways of perception, such as are our senses; yet it would be well with us if our knowledge were but as large as our ideas, and there were not many doubts and inquiries concerning the ideas

we have, whereof we are not, nor I believe ever shall be in this world, resolved."

Since we are confessedly so ignorant, and are but

"The small, who thank the knowledge of our kind
Greater than we, the wiser ignorance
Restricts its apprehension, sees and knows
No more than brain accepts in faith of sight,
Takes first what comes first, only sure so far.
. . . . . .
Since we love, we know enough."[1]

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[1] *Ferishtah's Fancies:* "A Pillar at Sebzevah."

CONCLUSION

HAVING laid down the solid foundations of a reasonable religious belief, Browning has not thought it necessary to introduce us to any one of the various Churches professing the Christian faith. In leading us to believe in God as our Creator and loving Father, and in Jesus Christ our Saviour, in assuring us of the infinite worth of our immortal souls, and the value of life as a preparation for a future state of immortality, he has not thought it necessary to urge the claims of any particular body of Christians.

In *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day* he rebukes the contemptuous attitude of the visitor to the little chapel where Christ is worshipped in a manner neither æsthetic nor intellectual; he shows us how in a vision he was transported to St. Peter's at Rome; here he *thinks* he can see error, but he is *sure* he can see the love and power of the Crucified One. Again, he is transported to a lecture-hall in the university town of Göttingen, where a professor was making very small dust of "the Christ-myth," yet in

reducing it to fragments, he bids his hearers treasure the precious dust as the most costly product of human imagination, and venerate the man as before. The visitor now resolves to value religion for itself, be very careless of its sects, and cultivate a mild indifferentism; but this, he learns, is to forsake Christ, and it is borne in upon him that there must be one best way of worship. Again he finds himself in the little dissenting chapel, where the water of life was being dispensed with a strong taint of the soil in a poor earthen vessel. His critical attitude has vanished, he will be content with "Gospel simplicity." This is all the hint we have of Browning's ecclesiastical position. Browning was educated in Nonconformity, and doubtless to his imaginative mind and powerful intellectualism the symbols and ornaments of religion were not necessary. He could create his appropriate surroundings; but we cannot all do this, and for inferior minds "the clothes of religion" are of real importance. What they may be the poet does not tell us. The great thing is to be sure we have the water of life, the material and shape of the cup from which we drink it does not seem to him to be of much consequence.

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